

RAILBAK***Dedication:***

To *RAILBAK Adventures* Readers everywhere; inside and outside Montana, USA, Volume II; a RAILBAK Novella; is even more of a labor of writing love than Volume I because of your encouraging support. And for that I dedicate Volume II to all of you present and future *RAILBAK Adventures* Readers by making Vol II available in download format only for introductory pricing so anyone can access it whether you have an e-reader or not.

BACK STORY: After writing actively for over 3+ decades; during what I fondly referred to as the *night shift*; (after everyone else in the house was tucked in bed and asleep and my work for the day jobs was done); I considered in the cold light of morning a time when I would have enough time to write full-time regardless of the economics involved with making a living and raising a family.

Then *un-suddenly*, during my battle with prostate cancer and ultimately beating it, I got a taste of what purposeful; (in my mind); writing I could do with more available time. I was still in the early throws of the 5-year prostate cancer residual treatment follow-ups when in the interim I was diagnosed with a brain tumor. What? Yes...a freakin brain tumor. The pre-diagnosed ravages of which had already prevented me from making a living; as I had been sick for months with no diagnosis forthcoming. Since my four-decades-approach to making a living was suddenly out, I started writing full-time for the first time in my writing life; and in the half-life it took me to produce a manuscript during my pre-cancer/brain tumor years I produced 3 manuscripts and was story-boarding this book #4.

Granted, the down-side of these sudden health issues resulted in me realizing it only took me about 40 years of hard work to successfully reach the poverty level-mwahaha; as we slowly but surely covered my medical bills; which at their zenith

exceeded a cool 7 figures; by emptying IRA's and selling assets and filling credit cards long-dormant. But no matter, our kiddoes were already educated, grown, and flourishing...so we did our parenting job...and continued to find a way to stay-alive financially as I simultaneously attempted to simply find a way to *stay-alive*.

The overwhelming assistance and soulful support from our extended Montana family who threw a surprise benefit for me in Missoula; and the heartwarming blessings from our wonderful friends in the many cities and states and countries where we lived and worked during my work-adventure-years; inspired me with the ability to survive. And here I am, still vertical in year 7 of battling my brain/ear/throat-tumor; having completed 30 days of proton beam radiation-style treatment in Seattle; and now am thankfully back in Montana; writing again to button-up this creative manuscript #4. Wow, talk about a blur. To unabashedly paraphrase another author's brilliant literary prose to describe my tumor experience: *the days grew longer but the years grew short*.

And believe you me, my love and appreciation for all your support is integrated into my *RAILBAK Adventures* series and *RAILBAK ON* series. A big part of my *RAILBAK* writing is for you-all and your enjoyment as you have unknowingly provided me with so much of the grist; through your love and support; for the creative mill churning my inventive thoughts for so many years; which kept me always moving forward. I am in debt to anyone reading *RAILBAK* books...soulful debt if there is such a thing. It allows me to believe, even in my disabled state, I provide some hint of purpose to someone. Part of the method to my madness with *RAILBAK* is to attract more people in the globe to read. It is not a social media-sponsored event; not electronically-multi-faceted; not sharing; not team-oriented; not confined to a specific game-playing happening in a field/court/diamond/arena competition; not glamorous; not digitally-enhanced raving with a driving beat and back-up singers; not out-loud attention-grabbing gamer shenanigans; not video-esque. Yet, the irony of sitting or lying prone and

reading alone is: *perhaps the most glorious, action-packed, emotionally exhausting, simultaneously purposeful and entertaining activity imaginable.*

*Once you read a book you love, you will experience one of the only healthiest addictions on the planet that won't empty your piggy bank. Why? Libraries...a lifetime of books available for free to satisfy your most-demanding reading addictions. It's selfish and independent; there is an *i*-in reading; it's focused; quiet; library-ish; yet bursting with wonder and energy and imagery; stealthily educational; life extending; recreational-esque; purposeful and exceedingly human. Pick a book...any book...from a comic book to poetry to a how-to, to *RAILBAK* to a classic; and read; and read; and read. It's never too late to start and never too early to begin. I guarantee you'll be hooked in no time. Enjoy. Tc*

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*Tc's (Purposeful) RAILBAK Adventures: Volume II**

**A conversational novella offering rare published insights into behind-the-scenes shadowy operational mission strategy development with global reach; in RAILBAK Adventures Vol II.*

PREFACE***Bakken Battle Continues******as Cartels choose between CIP & RIP***

Nobody who works in the US intel community as long as Railbak has, continues working successfully without passing multiple diverse exams both up-close-and-personal and written. I know, I have been examined many times for physical and mental capacities and have passed all the tests including the ever-critical shrinks' tests. What sets Railbak apart from us mere intellectual mortals is described by the neuro-experts as his eidetic memory; commonly referred to as a photographic memory and clearly mistakenly thought to be lost by many in adulthood. Characterized by the proven ability to recreate occurrences with vivid accuracy; Railbak contends he is simply hyper-observant as a result of vigilance training from the time he was a youngster on the rez. A common short-hand test for this type of memory capacity is not necessarily visual as much as it is remembering 8-10 words orally offered by an examiner at the beginning of a psychiatric exam and much later in the exercise being asked to repeat the words given, in no special

order. I regularly remembered 80% of the words given me. Railbak; as easy for him as racing up the rope climb in USMC boot camp, hand-over-hand without using his feet, with a full pack on his back; could recite the words given him by the psychiatrist on command quick enough that most examiners had to look at their notes to confirm the words Railbak quoted were correct. And almost without fail, as noted in the psych test conclusions; Railbak recalled the words in the order given. This amazing mental ability never tempted Railbak to brandish his memory capacities or any other of his unique skills as a virtual saber and lord-over those of us with lesser memory capacities; although it was the subject of many a pool wager by his team members over the years; and lost by anyone who bet against Railbak's 100% recall. As such, Railbak's legendary mission debriefings were attended by higher-ups from every civilian and military intel agency even remotely affiliated with a particular mission. Railbak's recall of specific detailed-conversations he participated in; and others he was informed about by people who were involved in them directly; have been tested by mission debriefers on many occasions to the astonishment of those present that Railbak's quotes were almost verbatim from conversations involving multiple participants and lasting for minutes on end as actually captured on tape or film. So, highlighting yet another of Railbak's rare talents, formed the foundation for RAiLBAK Adventures Volume II, as he recalled for me a number of his many conversations how the real Battle for the Bakken strategy was strategized and structured. Interested US intel partners and affiliates going on the offensive, brandishing a preventative theory enforced by a few boots-on-the-ground; and stylish running shoes; against a ghost. Strategizing as they moved forward clinging to the one simple Railbakian-developed goal in mind: protect and preserve the Bakken and the US from terror; at all costs.

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*Bakken Battle Continues
as Cartels choose between CIP & RIP*

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I

(devil)-d=evil

Do you mean to try to tell me, Railbak, that you and your team will attempt to enlist known drug cartel members into the confidential informant program of the United States government?

I'm not trying to tell you Sky...

That's Mr Oblonsky to you Railbak...

Here's the way this mission works. I call you Sky; (author's note: pronounced Ski); so I don't call you what I really think of you, cause my Gram would turn over in her grave. You should remember I was on your last FUBAR mission in West Africa Sky, where your squad was supposed to be supplying real-time intel and security. Your efforts were rewarded with your present civilian moniker Mr in lieu of your prior military rank. How you scratched your way back into the intel arena I have no idea; but so far you've made one shockingly good decision: getting me and my team on point for the Bakken Battle. So you should know from the jump that we drive the anti-terror aspect of this mission and if you need any additional proof of that, contact anyone you like. Cracker Jacks, Sky, I am flat telling you one of our line of attacks to preventing Bastillia from recruiting potential terrorists from present, known criminal types into her domestic terror team is to recruit cartel members through whatever means necessary to become NSA CIP's. If Bastillia is here and becoming actively involved in domestic terror activities, members of the drug cartels will know it long before we will; until we can leverage a few of them to bring us into the criminal intel loop. Comments?

This is a deal with the devil Railbak. Why don't you just get a bunch of tech geeks from Silicon Valley and start bugging and tracking every potential gang-banger drug cartel and his crew who enter the US?

I may have underestimated you Sky. You actually exhibit the potential to perhaps dredge up a couple of the GR8 characteristics hidden deep inside. Maybe allying my team with drug cartel members would be a mini-deal-with-a-devil-or-two; in an effort to help bring Bastillia and her crew down. A direct-Devil-deal would be to attempt to enlist CIP's from Bastillia's terror crew. Bastillia and her crew are already in Hades; my team and I just aim to choose the Rest-In-Peace strategy for her team so they can lie where they live for eternity; as opposed to the CIP-strategy with a few of the members of the cartels. Once the Bakken is deemed safe from terror-types or at least swept clean of any likely terrorist attacks from Bastillia, then we'll encourage the mini-devil cartels to vacate. If the cartels attempt to remain in the Bakken after we remove the Devil Bastillia terrorist threat, we will employ our particular team-brand of RIP-strategy for the cartels; in lieu of cartel-CIP; and lose no sleep over it. Always remember: evil will never be forgiven at any level by our team; only removed...permanently.

And just who is going to assist you in these uniquely accommodating Railbakian efforts without a phalanx of tech and intel experts from high tech firms?

Look, Sky, normally I wouldn't burn any time with you; but it's time to invest in you what my beloved Gram would call: a heaping helping of Montana straight-talk. In times of chaos I've learned I have to trust someone and you're it because I need some Railbak-style help ASAP and you are the face of the NSA in the Bakken. So you are positioned perfectly to lend me a valuable hand if I can coach you-up to lead your high-tech NSA firm for the first time in your life and supply real-time intel to my team.

You can't talk to me like that Railbak.

As one of my Drill Instructor's used to say; I can and I will and it may get worse before it gets better so buckle-up. Regardless how anemic your intel data was in Africa; I believe it wasn't a result of what was available, I believe you just had no

clue how to process the data collected. You just had; and probably still have; no concept what the intel gathering arms of the military and militaristic firms like the NSA are capable of during the garnering and interpreting process. Since this Bakken anti-terrorist strategy is based partially on the drug cartels' involvement, I don't want to have to rely on Devil Dog to locate dope shipments flowing into the thousand of square miles of the Bakken from heaven knows where.

I'm sure you have picked up on my not-so-subtle references to my need for general intel gathering to understand it is imperative my team enjoys unfettered, priority access to any and all eyes-in-the sky under NSA jurisdiction, courtesy of Mort's capable crew. And believe me, ATF is already on board for supplying on-demand manpower on the ground. But you called it Sky-we need techies. But even you have to remember one thing: tech is only as good as the techies providing it. Sky, you are a proud executive of one of the most sophisticated, purposeful tech firms in the world boasting one of the most brilliant techies I have ever had the pleasure of working with: Snedham. I need you to grant him unregulated oversight over all NSA techie personnel associated with this mission.

What? He's a geek.

Exactly. I knew you'd agree. The reason you screwed-up on intel missions in the field Sky is: there are no desks. You were constantly looking for the experts sitting behind big desks with name plates; multiple screens and gold pens to give orders without understanding what you're looking for because you aren't a dimensional thinker.

You already have the expert techies because our techies are more than coders. We go on missions where we are trying to anticipate terror and stop it by integrating intel into the solution so we need techies who are not geographically limited. Think about it Sky, without me getting on my soap box, what topics do the brilliant tech minds concentrate on in Silicon Valley with all their billions of capitalization? It's not creative anticipation. It's stuff like driverless cars and cell phones. Cars? Sky, there's nothing creative about cars. They were invented a long time ago and we are still obsessed with cars. Take radar, GPS, lasers and pop them on top of a

car and give orders to the coders to go to work. Every one of the developing companies' techies goes to a big corporate town hall-style meeting headed up by one corporate guru and everybody in the audience goes crazy. Why? They are the employees caught in a captive audience; all being paid a great salary, working for a company that allows them to eat, sleep, work and in many cases stay adolescent in their outlook while working on fun stuff like cars and social media. Investors go crazy when they stream the meeting on their devices and see the response; not thinking for a moment it's like a talk show host with cue cards for the audience. Which, BTW, is a marketing concept embraced by the original Tupperware inventors and other pyramid organizations. There is an entire school of thought that Apple would have advanced faster and further with more evolutionary influence from sources other than one person or a small, select executive group.

These high tech companies are doing exactly the opposite of what they should be doing: reducing cars on the road at certain times and in certain [ocations. Fewer cars in urban areas or high pollution zones should be the goal. The economic impact of use of rubber-tired vehicles arguably represents the most constant positive force in our GNP. The ripple effect of vehicles on our economy and Canada's for that matter is almost too much to chronicle accurately, including parts manufacturers and the sheer numbers of employees who depend on cars for a living. In large part vehicles are how we move our economic model forward and grow, whether it's about goods in transit or people.

It's not that as a society we shouldn't want evolution in our machines like cars. I'm from Montana, a large rural state that depends on rubber-tired vehicles for a large percentage of its economy and not just for basic transportation. Agricultural advances in machinery allow a single family to operate a farm in Montana and other rural states where there is virtually no labor market or the profit margins are too skinny to use hired labor. The point here is you have to stare through what Silicon Valley is producing. Pierce through the noise like a fixed-wing, fast-mover breaking the sound barrier. Once you explode through it, you can observe and think in virtual silence without the distraction of the vibration and noise. Most of the auto evolution is already happening in car companies. This is the metaphor for

our lives under the social media explosion. More people need to go to a library and study, read, study, write, learn and meditate without the noise. Figure out who they are without being surrounded by the culture of a population. Continuing the simple example of car manufacturers: they are advancing automobiles because they know who they are and what they do because they've studied and made a living doing it for decades. It's their business model and they are very experienced at it and have developed it with techies leading the way. Many people today are lost in the social media world of today and may never find out who they are because they are led by a particular culture of advancement. I don't want those folks on my team.

Let's be candid, many of the car manufacturing companies worldwide have already developed electric, hybrid and semi-autonomous automobiles. Silicon Valley has the capital and brain power to do whatever they want to and they pick cars? And let's don't get lulled to sleep with the attractive argument that it's imperative we throw all the intellectual and physical resources possible to eliminate the tradition liquid-fuel powered internal combustion engine-powered vehicles because they produce exhaust that pollutes. Electric cars pollute; even if passively. E-vehicles use electricity to fuel them when they are plugged in into power sources somewhere. These plug-in outlets give the gift of power delivered from a major producer; and electric vehicles use disposable batteries or power cells of some type, the majority of which are not recyclable or biodegradable. E-vehicles operate on asphalt-based roadways, drive on rubber tires and require an infrastructure that needs electricity for signage and lights. The economics of vehicular transportation is clearly a wonderfully profitable and exciting economic; primarily because of the world's fascination with automobiles. I'm confident an enhanced safety effort positively affecting drivers and pedestrians alike will carry on regardless if the Silicon Valley techies continue on this aspect of its overall economic mission or not. Especially considering all the R and D being poured into this specific aspect of the overall value of the worldwide tech GNP by automobile manufacturers in the US, Asia and Europe. As a result I'm observing that the inordinate amount of capital; including intellectual; invested by the Silicon Vally would be better-focused on a myriad of other critical global issues and believe the

Silicon Valley's lack of participation in the evolution of vehicular advancement wouldn't be missed. Bill Gates; arguably the most recognized techie geek name in the world; is in for contributing to the London-based Dementia Discovery Fund to the tune of \$50 million to assist in the effort to find a cure for Alzheimer's disease. Why? Because Gates realizes curing Alzheimers would have an untold positive impact on the US economy. Forget present day costs for care for Alzheimers disease in the US; when the costs could potentially soar to \$1 trillion by 2050. This dimensional connection by Gates of the negative aspects of Alzheimers including taking thousands of great minds out of service; and the positive economic return if cured; is convincing enough to Gates to lead him to invest \$50 million dollars in the cure. If left unfettered from investors and corporate executives, this is the power techie geeks have the ability to make.

I'm trying to follow you Gunner.

Look, Sky, the point is: many of the techies in the Silicon Valley are simply coders; working for arguably three of the top five capitalized companies in the world each controlled in their advancement economically and intellectually by a handful of people. These young, bright techies believe they are free in thought yet their efforts are channeled from a single group above them. This notion of small numbers of people influencing large numbers of people transcribes into the fact that a few people; all of similar ilk; influence millions of people worldwide. Each of these multi-billion dollar tech companies controls the financial and psychological wherewithal in this social media-driven-world to be market-makers for their own particular products. Humongous tech companies are brilliant marketers, collecting their clients' personal and psychological data by scraping a tremendous amount of their clients' habitual data for use as connectors to their product development including product preferences, which they use to steer human market segments to purchase their products regardless of environmental impacts or what's best for the global community. But again the economics can't be questioned. These tech organizations don't have to be purposeful issue-driven problem-solvers or intellectual-philosophical thinkers to produce their particular economic

contribution to the global markets. And I am all about economics. I just want to get my share of these brilliant minds on my missions. Especially this one.

These Silicon Valley-type companies are comprised of highly paid market-mercs who take orders from corporate execs driven by their need to continually drive profits and growth with sexy trending developments which investors will find attractive; as they are channeled toward the cash registers and ultimately the finance markets via social media. The important thing to realize is that a very small group of Silicon Valley tech company executives influence mega-trends affecting millions of consumers world-wide because the tech organizations are social media giants themselves and form the very foundations upon which they operate.

OK, I get it Gunner. Now you are just showing off.

*Look, Sky, the irony about referring to the concentration of high-tech companies which began on Route 128 outside Boston loosely known at one point as: **the Silicon Valley of the East Coast**; is that it wasn't. So-called Route 128 was a group of entrepreneurs who were inventing computers and expanding the breadth of usage while enhancing economics with their inventions. There were no blueprints as they created wealth out of whole cloth...computers and all the trappings including chips, were being accepted by the general global population because the efficiency computers provided in all imaginable aspects of life were welcome, purposeful enhancers to personal and business lives. Economics were being created. As an example; Ken Olsen left Lincoln Labs to create Digital Equipment Corporation. DEC had manufacturing plants in Massachusetts, New Hampshire and the US Southern tier and in Asia and Italy. DEC had regularly scheduled flights on DEC-owned jets and choppers to its various US facilities.*

The personalities who founded high-tech companies like Wang and DEC weren't simply coding, they were inventing with borderless blueprints. The legend is Ken Olsen "hired" retired folks and paid them in worthless stock at the time to build mini-computers together by hand in a warehouse in Massachusetts. Yet, ultimately, many of the CEO/founders of the Route 128 companies were removed

by their own Directors...Ken Olsen included. Purportedly to ensure the companies were open to; and receiving; data from diverse contributors to direct the companies forward thinking. And Directors were concerned with developing and growing economics in locales the high tech companies were located in, as well as overall corporate success. DEC had its own Real Estate and Construction Division which was established for locating and building DEC facilities. DEC vetted construction companies for DEC's competitive bid lists. Getting accepted on the DEC bid lists was so sought after, DEC scheduled regular classes for its Real Estate and Construction folks so they would recognize a bride if presented; to qualify for a position on any of the coveted bid lists for facilities construction.

What? OK, I'm not sure I follow if this is a metaphor. Uh, why BATF, it's under the DOJ?

It's an allegory. I get a whole lot of whats from folks like you Sky. You have to spend as much time observing, reading, thinking and writing in order to figure out who you are and who the other people in the room are. The answers are not found in what's trending or by listening to the constant noise courtesy of social media. Point is: what better agency than the DOJ to dispense my special RAiLBAK-style justice? It's a rhetorical question. ATF is a dimensional crime-fighter, problem-solvers like us; and hopefully I practice what I preach and allow creative troubleshooters to contribute and execute on the fly and positively affect our mission economy which involves de-terrorising the Bakken. Because we have no investors to be concerned with, we only have the mission success at hand, which at times moves very quickly and integrates high tech and action with nobody overseeing execution except our team; and frequently includes alternately saving and taking human life.

Look, every successful company, group or organization practicing its craft today is a tech team. But my team consists of big-time integrative, creative techies, frequently inventing tech solutions as they move forward; not lock-step coders. My teams are characterized by underpaid techies in every sense of the word including the ability to use highly sophisticated non-virtual weaponry, while working in the most foreboding of conditions, isolated against the most unfriendly opposition

imaginable; attempting to follow a mission blueprint including desired objectives which my team seems to think are actually a loose set of guidelines; instead of absolute rules; and generally the blueprint is the first thing that hits the trash when the hot brass starts hitting the dirt.

Like us, ATF is not geographically challenged, which we interpret to mean borderless as well; so the RCMP will welcome ATF involvement since the Bakken extends into Canada. Combined with Canada's own shale-oil operations and other substantial Canadian-oil producing fields and rare mineral mines are as attractive potential for terrorists' targets as the Bakken. And Canada doesn't have near the anti-terrorist assets as its disposal as the US does, including the NSA, courtesy of you and your teams here in the Bakken.

Look, Sky, pretend for the purpose of this discussion that I'm not a true philosophy-thinker intellectual guy having a thoughtful conversation with you; not just a dreamer or talker or optimist. I'm simply a pragmatic doer and team leader who is also a trained, astute observer who executes to solve heretofore unsolvable global problems; completely unconcerned about my team's pay or food or housing; also not concerned about any company stockholders or the financial markets-because they do not influence our missions. Because that's who I am and that's who you should be and I'm looking for more people like that to have on my teams, all of whom happen to have as high-level a technical skill-set as the coders in Silicon Valley tech companies. This intellectual freedom my team members enjoy allows them to interface with electronics so we can communicate with humans in a way that makes our problem-solving more efficient and purposeful. As opposed to burning time like much of the population utilizing mobile devices; by passively viewing various images that serve no purpose other than generally to make us more adolescent in our approach to life.

I think I'm following you, Gunner.

Plainly, I need your pipeline of tech-saavy recruits to fulfill my overall mission of quashing extremely sophisticated terrorists invading our home land with their brand of technological effectiveness. Why? Your recruits have already exhibited

the first aspect of a purposeful life: service. They don't care if there are big balls to sit on while they work. Sitting on cracked faux-leather chairs on wheels or ammo boxes piled on logs or standing knee deep in water is their reality. Pardon me, but in my opinion they've already displayed they've got big commitment to the organization by signing on the dotted line and I mean that in the character sense. They just don't care if they are in a trench in some far away locale or on a vinyl chair in a windowless office that squeaks when you move; if they're using the most advanced technology available and doing purposeful work. I've seen these young, brilliant techies produce virtual miracles.

Some day I'll give you my position on the reasons behind requiring service for everyone in the US. And I don't necessarily mean military service. But service to do something you wouldn't normally do. Work in a hospital which is understaffed, dig wells where there is no water, build dams where there is too much water, deliver meals where the elderly cannot cook, build roads where there are none, etc...and only for a minimum of one year required service, with incentives to do more. The first years of undergrad school I have observed is wasted on adolescents. It doesn't take a genius to see the failure or did-not-return rate for collegiate 1st year students.

Probably the most curious aspect about electronic devices and their place in the media market today is they have the power to drive entire billion dollar companies with primarily images and videos of entertainment on a device which is primarily a phone. Think about this: the boomers parents were so concerned about the adverse influence of TV; most boomers were limited to the amount of time they could spend in front of the TV. The irony is: many boomers are spending much more time seeking entertainment on any number of mobile devices, TV and social media sites; than they were ever allowed to spend in front of TV passively watching major network entertainment.

I'm still not sure how this relates to the Bakken?

OK Sky, let's wrap this up so we don't have to discuss it again. We boast leadership on my mission teams because it's real. We don't need any more help

unless we request it. But when we do, we'll need CEO's wearing Sergeant's uniforms who are unafraid and risk averse, who understand purposeful lives and are satisfied with getting paychecks like enlisted folks not CEO's. So, your mission is to anticipate who in your teams fits that description. And one of your guys to do the searching is Snedham. You have access to the largest and arguably most important component of the NSA's Signals Intelligent Directorate (SID); 71,000 military and civilian contract intelligence computer network exploitation specialists, analysts, targeting specialists, computer hardware and software designers, and electrical engineers; highlighted by the super secret TAO-Tailored Access Operations intel gathering unit of the NSA. That is old school-Route 128 folks-those are the recruits we're looking for this Bakken mission. And you have access one way or another to this group. Here's the deal: my initial strategy will be to follow the money much like Mossad did when initiating its terrorist-fighting strategy including its campaign against ISIL. By targeting the ISIL-controlled oil fields, money depots and finance higher-ups the Harpoon group within Mossad assisted in the crippling of ISIL.

Why are large-Silicon Valley companies dedicating what I think is an inordinate amount of our country's finite intellectual and physical energy to trying to sell more cars? Because they want to keep the work force adolescent. Cars are fun plus the techies can go to a fun work place every day to work on a fun project, which is more like day-care and less like work. A work-place where the work force doesn't have to think about anything hard faced by many middle class families and parents, such as; day care, lunch, parking places, insurance coverage or income. Look, both personal and base fuel energy sources are finite and under constant pressure from users and terrorists. Maybe because life expectancy being extended into the 80's under present day conditions, allows people today; who in the boomer era wouldn't be caught dead at a lego movie or watching u-tube videos; to go and watch and be thoroughly entertained because they are maturing later in life. As long as we can recruit the type of team member I need I'm good.

To assist you with your recruiting efforts for this mission it's important to ask a few questions of potential Railbak team members: What purpose does it serve to

throw billions of private capital to driverless cars other than placating investors by enhancing stock prices. All the issues we face in this country and why do we pour our brainiac efforts into coding for cars and phones? Stopping terrorists and career criminals and their crews from practicing their bully-based craft in the US and the world requires problem-solvers working on yet to be identified defensive tactics to counter the nearly sci-fi efforts employed by these nefarious bad guys because they have so much cash. Mere coders with software engineering degrees need not apply. I can tell you now what reduces crime: a good dimensional economy. A great dimensional (read diverse) economy would probably eradicate crime. So why not pour everything we have into the economy and 100% employment? Build satellite manufacturing plants in multiple locations where there is a ready work force; which are so efficient that companies outside the US cannot compete; instead of single-large work sites in Silicon Valley as big as small cities. Pay to move people to the jobs. Then; enhance the Silicon Valley's work force by offering tax breaks for advancements in software resulting in an expansive economy; ie; high speed public transportation or advanced, not-yet-invented modes of transportation without tires nor need for asphalt highways. It's not sexy but if a company figures out how to move millions of people where they want to go: that's an economic.

Ask the pivotal questions which will identify our team member candidates. How about controlling catastrophic weather? How about anticipating where and when hurricanes will form and figure out how to undo them; or wild fires; pestilence; drought; terrorism? Assign all the tech folks to solving valuable, purposeful problems that drain our taxes, which in the reverse would ultimately be worth billions to investors anyway.

Finally; as a country we shouldn't necessarily be concentrating on shrinking or increasing the combined military population when we should focus on making it smarter; more intuitive; more intellectually challenging. Historically we train folks in the military and then end up paying for many of them on unemployment or homelessness because they aren't trained sufficiently to get out or incentivized enough to stay in or are out at the end of their contracts because of budget

shrinkage or lack of specialty training so they aren't pursued to re-up. The Army for instance has set a goal of over a million soldiers. Raising active duty personnel by about 16,000 to 476,000; National Guardsmen increase about 8,000 to 343, up to 199,000; and reservists 199,000. Bonuses can range from \$10,000 to \$40,000 for soldiers looking to separate from service and new enlistees. And the Army is not content with these recent numbers looking to grow to as many as 550,000 active Army soldiers; 355,000 Guard members; and 209,000 reservists. This is inertia we haven't seen in some time. The effort will be high tech training with us. I'm aware of the recent GAO study concluding that the nation's military forces current state of readiness is "not strong enough to protect vital U.S. national security interests from worldwide threats." I won't bore you with the GAO's analysis of each service's weaknesses but suffice it so say as a civilian agency we will be focusing on the highest tech-training possible and if we can't provide it, we'll send recruits to it; regardless what the focus is service-wide. Now is your time to go get some recruits, Sky, so let's make it happen.

Gunner, I can't just go pluck recruits from other agencies or military branches.

Sky, if you are going to find my team recruits you must stare through things. Economies drive everything; including families. Without work or economics your family is in jeopardy. Does this sound naïve or simple? Well, so be it. Smart people...brilliant tech people are not concentrating on reinventing the latest cell phone...it's already been invented. Do you realize a handful of people in the Silicon Valley are using the billions of dollars under their control to shape; some say manipulate; the economies and perhaps the cultures of hundreds of thousands of people worldwide. Stare through it.

I maintain brilliant techies are creating how to communicate in the dimension beyond cell phones and use their substantial, collective skills in teams like mine to solve problems not yet anticipated by the noise of social media. Ask the right questions Sky and we may beat this terror threat that is surely coming. Get out in front of the process and find me some brilliant, creative intel-oriented recruits who have integrated work into their lives to the extent they don't differentiate between life and work...or we'll be trying to pry this threat out of downtown Bismark before

you can say ISIL. And if we don't, your reward will be sitting at a desk in Guam overseeing the development of a program to teach Korean as a second language in their public schools. This is like the idiots who control the initiation or hazing practices in our upper-crust colleges and universities which I'm pretty sure you are familiar with because you were exposed to these morons and their ridiculous, adolescent practices during your years getting punched into the in-crowd of fancy clubs at your up-scale prep-school and prestigious Ivy educational institutions. They are adolescents with so little intellectual maturity they still use alcohol as the foundation for hazing. They set the tone for the foundation of our future leaders and are common in thought and deed...drinking and pranking their way through life.

Since we're on the techie topic; here's a heads-up for you from a Northern tier guy. You are surrounded by recruits already brimming with the GR8 and tech skills to boot. And not just the classroom kind but applications for the most unpredictable opposition to their livelihood: Mother Nature. These kids have integrated high tech predictability into the complex world of weather on farming and ranching. A terrorist team presents no greater threat to their predictabilities for per acre crop yield; wheat protein content; ground moisture; calf and ewe survivability; and it's relentless. Think about it Sky: these guys have worked with critical software for driverless harvesters long before driverless cars were a trend. And these kids are born hunters. Whether searching for their own stock or unwelcome critters fouling their fields or fearlessly stalking any kind of prey with nothing more than a hand-held, a few provisions and a rifle. This is a group of kids that has worked with the daily unpredictables of life as an active part of their very existence. And remember, nobody is sitting on a beach ball in front of a wall of brand new wall of screens surrounded by brilliant colleagues working in collaboration. These kids are working in mobile offices alone in the cabs of trucks or machinery with ipads and thumb drives strewn across the seats or hoods of trucks or propped on hay bales or plywood tossed on top of a couple of sawhorses in a barn with no heat in the winter and no A/C in the summer. Hard work in hard conditions is what these Northern tier kids know and that's before and after they are in school perfecting their tech intellect.

Cracker Jacks, Sky. I need you to expand your intellectual breadth as quickly as possible. This threat is real and as much as I dislike admitting it, I'm understaffed. You want hard... you want difficult, different people the likes of which you have probably never recruited. The early undergraduate years in many US schools are wasted on the young. If one of the majority of youth's high-level collective goals is to survive hazing to get accepted into a drinking, beer-pong culture, Ivy League colleges are not populated with the young people I'm looking for. If your recruits lament the fact that college was five of their best years they are not who I'm looking for either because they already have a long row to hoe. I'm not suggesting I want clones of myself because I do not. I want young minds revealing diverse dimensional approaches to trouble-shooting especially in the field; the real petri dish in the laboratory of life. I didn't attend a traditional undergraduate school or graduate school and some people would still consider me well educated. Just between us old warriors I am an intellectual. I just hide it.

I always thought I was just born old and I never saw the importance of attending college. Frankly, as much as I hate to admit it- but I learned something very valuable from the US Navy. The more teenage kids I saw every time I was on a Naval vessel; getting a ride to and fro to black op in a faraway place in the world; working in the belly of a floating iron bomb as large as some buildings in downtown Boston; with some of the highest level, purposeful technology known to mankind in dangerous, stressful environments; the more I realized those were the kind of kids I want on my teams. For instance, of the 5,000 or so men and women running an aircraft carrier, most of the techies are not college graduates. And the more I spent time observing them, the more I developed my previously mentioned theory that college is wasted on the young. So where are they? Right here in North Dakota. And they may not even be thinking about joining an organization like the NSA. But you have a budget that we can put to good use.

Do you know Military service runs in the family? More than 60% of new active-duty recruits have an immediate family member who also has service. About 44% of youth up to age 24 had a grandparent who served. New recruits are almost exactly the same with 45% of them had a grandparent who served. Let alone 27%

who had a parent who served. Do the research. Target areas in North Dakota where concentrations of families with service members and veterans live and set up a table in a shopping mall. Here's a stat that my folks discovered which should help you recruit which I can share with you since you will be doing all the heavy-recruiting-lifting: 14% of the overall veteran population in North Dakota is comprised of millennials. ND is in the top 3 states in the union for percentage of young veterans. And Montana is right next door and here's another stat for you regarding recruiting: Montana is in the top 3 states in the US for the number of veterans living in a state as a share of the total population. These folks are already trained or related to a trained veteran; just waiting for you. If they pass the GR8 character muster they can serve right here in their home state and take on domestic terrorists without ever lifting a glock 9 millimeter except to practice shooting on a range. And if they want to learn to really shoot. I've got a sniper buddy up in Canada who served with distinction in Iraq and can skewer a cantaloupe with a single shot from over 2 miles away. Course we'll have to procure a McMillan TAC 50 rifle for the team which shouldn't be a problem. Go get 'em.

Guess I'd better buckle up and get moving.

Remember this Sky. During the Viet Nam war we as a country perpetuated our preference with adolescence when we ensured college kids could drink their way out of the draft by staying in undergraduate school with their magic student deferments. For the better part of 242 years the Marine Corps prided itself in being an all-volunteer service. OK, maybe those college kids were really smart by also being independent and staying in school, but during the Viet Nam war, the Marine Corps took a percentage of US draftees for the first time in history. And when you read historical accounts of the ferocity which these draftees fought and protected each other in and out of the military during a very unpopular time for veterans in our history, I would take any one of those folks for my teams. Give me a person with the GR8 who is motivated and smart and I'll make it happen.

I know of so many personal accounts of Marine vets who served in the Viet Nam era. But one that touched me was a Marine who didn't serve in Viet Nam but was

a fourth generation Marine E-5 Sergeant of seven proud family members, both male and female with a US Navy Ltjg veteran mom. It wasn't until one of his kiddoes was in high school at his alma mater that veterans were recognized in public. It was at a concert around Veteran's Day and the choir director asked all the vets in the audience to stand and be recognized by the audience. This is a large high school for Montana and the auditorium was packed full of choir members from all four high school classes; parents; siblings and family members. A typical noisy loud, joyful event and suddenly the auditorium was completely silent. Nobody stood for what seemed like an eternity. My friend said he asked his wife what the choir director said as he was typically reading the program and thinking about work. She had a shocked look on her face and responded that he was supposed to stand up. He looked around and nobody had stood up. Everyone was looking around and then slowly he began to stand as others stood and he said he could feel people looking at him, and many of the others standing, with such confused looks on their faces because they had no idea most of the people standing had ever served. It just wasn't part of the Viet Nam era vets live's to broadcast their military service and in those years there was no social media to betray them. In those days Private was more than a rank in the military to these quiet veterans.

My buddy is funny and he said even though he was on West Pac orders; (read Viet Nam); for nearly his entire active service after advanced ITR at Camp Pendleton; he was just too valuable to go to war. The Corps kept sending him to Marine schools. So he fought his battles invading the sands of Laguna Beach and defending at the net on a 2-man volleyball court as his older bro defended his Marine bro's honor at places like Khe Sanh and Con Thien with the 1st Battalion 9th Marines. My bud guarded the lower west coast of the US against all attackers on the sand and off as a pogue with H&HS (Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron) with the 3d MAW (Marine Air Wing). The only similarity between the two brothers service other than they were both Sergeant E-5's is my buddy's primary base MCAS El Toro in Southern California was shut down; killed off during budget cuts and his bro's primary group; the 1/9 was shut down after Viet Nam because it was also killed off.

The story has a crazy ending, which shows the ebb and flow of veterans' status. Years later when the X'ers and millennial's thankfully overcame their parents' reluctance to celebrate service to the country , one of my bud's extended family members chided her sister, my bud's wife, on a social media post because my wife in a recognition post was thanking my bud and their oldest son; (now an Army Major in the National Guard and veteran of the Iraq War; serving at the time as a Bradley platoon commander); for their service and she neglected to insert the word Era in her post after Viet Nam and her sister chided her insinuating that my bud's wife was trying to up his status by inferring he fought in country. My buddy, who was never recognized as a veteran for years in public and yet was named Marine of the Month and received a meritorious MCAS Commanding General's Mast and promotion to Sergeant E-5 and frequently, humorously stated he was just too valuable to send to war. But he once got a really bad paper cut at his office or was yelled at by Gunnery Sergeants on a regular basis; and thought it was so curious that for years he was worried about getting spit-on cause he was a Marine and a vet; but whenever my bud went on leave he was advised not to travel in uniform if he didn't have to. Then in one social media post he was recognized as a lower-status veteran because he didn't go to war. Who'd have thunk it? You get the point Sky? Think independently...don't pay attention to the noise...with the advent of social media group thought is more prevalent than ever...find who you are...read a book...go to a library...reflect on life....be private...be observant...be vigilant...be creative...be purposeful...be my eyes and ears. Because I'll be too busy trying to stem domestic terror wherever it comes from; and find me the kiddoes I need to deal with this threat. Clear?

Crystal Gunner. What leverage do you anticipate using to get so-called cartel members to become CIP's?

We're planning to bust a crew which we anticipate will be attempting to bring in dope shipments through the Port of Vancouver in the next couple days. And it occurs to me as we're on the topic; recently a Montana corporation purchased controlling interest in a Canadian diamond mine. I have no information there is a connection between any potential terrorist activities and the diamond mine but it

doesn't take a genius to draw a line from Vancouver east via the trans-Canada highway, south across the Canadian/US border into Montana at any number of rural entry points and boom-head east along the northern tier through Cut Bank and you're in the Bakken with little or no oversight from the Canadian Mounties or Montana Highway Patrol or any other government agency on either side of the border.

Really? Humor me Gunner. I get it and want to help with any intel I can martial. What are we looking for?

OK, Sky, if you are serious; you are about ready to enter the hard, depraved world of physical and mental human terror, the likes of which you've never seen. Not even on the battlefield. Imagine the most violent video game brought to life and it's worse than that—all for greed; regardless how they couch their social and religious intentions in their social media videos. There are no uniforms, rules or Geneva Conventions. It is the dark internet brought to life. As a country, it represents our worst enemy.

As we speak ATF teams are tracking two container vessels which departed Mexico a few days ago, after taking-on its primary container cargo in Puerto Vallarta. The legitimate cargo on the vessels is scheduled for delivery at various ports of call north along the US West coast before reaching Vancouver. However, probably not so curiously, what the vessels did was drop anchor at virtually the same location offshore from Baja, according to the longs-and-lats, a couple hours apart, for about 30 minutes declaring minor engine problems. Vessels reported repairs completed; prior to upping anchor; and continued on their northerly course according to their original schedule showing the Port of Vancouver as their ultimate port. As we speak ATF teams are tracking two container vessels which departed Mexico a few days ago, after taking-on its primary container cargo in Puerto Vallarta. The legitimate cargo on the vessels is scheduled for delivery at various ports of call north along the US West coast before reaching Vancouver.

Why wait to intervene until the vessels arrive in Vancouver and not in the US where you have primary jurisdiction? You have eye-in-the-sky, real-time tracking?

First, we may or may not decide to intervene in the delivery process until the dope reaches the Bakken. We ideally want to discover the web the cartel weaves especially from mother-ship through Canadian port to their delivery patterns on land. The cargo ship operators may or may not be co-conspirators. If they are owned by cartels it will take forever to unwrap them and we'll only get some boat drivers and freight longshoremen, not the top cartel bad guys. I know it sounds like a bad B drug flick but that's the way it works. Vancouver is a potential entry point for Bakken-bound drugs because the Northern US ports of entry are on high alert with plenty of under-cover operators watching coastal container ships heading north from the Americas. Vancouver is the next best option for drug suppliers targeting Northern tier US drug markets like the Bakken because it is chock full of Chinese container ships which are under microscopic scrutiny. Access to the US is an easy drive across one of the longest underpatrolled border's in the world, access through made famous during the prohibition years when Canadian distillers supplied the illicit bootleggers in the norther tier US cities.

Do the research Sky. According to the Port of Vancouver's own website it's a large global entry port for East meets West container ships, as well as southern tier flagships from Panama. Vancouver boasts four common user container terminals with a total annual capacity of nearly 3 million TEU's, which is big. And intermodal containers can be easily transferred between different modes of transportation from ships to trains or trucks. Three Class I railroads and one regional short line service the Port; each with extensive on-deck rail facilities, not to mention a variety of transload, cross-decking and warehousing, off-deck container and maintenance facilities. It's better than a rabbit warren maze of activity. With plenty of trade arriving from Asia and large commodities trading partners like China it's a dream world for the cartels to get their illicit wares into oil-rich Canada and ultimately south of the border on the US side to the Bakken.

You have any solid leads?

Semi-submerged vessels from Baja intersected each of the two container vessels during their stop for reported minor engine issues; offloaded cargo of some-type onto each container vessel which we assume to be drugs...and not of the leafy

variety; before returning to Baja each time and sending the container vessels on their way North. I know what you're thinking Sky.

Really Gunner? Humor me again.

You're thinking: Railbak, you are a lot smarter than you look.

Screw you Railbak.

Maybe Sky...but not today. Today I'm too busy strategizing with the devil-like antics of the cartels before I take on the Devil.

I should have busted you when we were on the mission in West Africa.

You didn't have the suck Sky and you knew it so being the politician instead of the warrior you opted not to try to hang the blame on a mission gone south on me because you knew it would be embarrassing to have an officer's mission report rejected in an open court-martial proceeding. Plus I figure it wasn't a coincidence as a direct result of your un-superior intel work on that mission you ended-up retiring early from the military because JAG threatened you with a court-martial based on the circumstantial evidence that your poor performance was directly responsible for more than one death on that mission. Sound familiar?

We're done here Railbak.

You're done here Sky if you do anything to undermine me either intentionally or as a result of your complete lack of GR8 character development. I'll make sure this time you won't find a hole to jump into when the action commences. We'll be in touch Sky and you can believe I've got eyes on you. BTW, I anticipate my team is going to need to use Snedham and Sarafina at some point.

Hopefully they'll be available.

They will be; especially considering you will receive notice to that effect from the DOJ; just to make sure they are available when we call on you in need of their specialized anti-terror assistance for our ATF partner.

We'll see.

Look Sky, so far I've been as professional as I plan on being with you, but since it's just you and me here today; here's the way we work. If you do anything to delay or interfere with any of my ops including not providing me with real-time intel as soon as you trip over it; I'll hang you out to dry even if it's 25 below zero and you are soaking wet. And if you think you have suck, compared to me, you won't believe how fast you can be transferred to a place that sucks even worse than where you are now...like Guam for instance; for the rest of your career if you are lucky enough to hang onto your career; such that it is. Now, if I were you I'd shut-up and not say another word until after I leave because we'll contact you when we need you and your people...until then you'll get status reports consistent with your security clearance level which I hope is above Confidential. But if it isn't we'll brief Snedham and Sarafina who both carry Top Secret Clearance levels, including Eyes Only. Sorry, I've got to take this call. Don't get up Sky, I'll see myself out.

GUNNER?

Sergeant Gusto. Long time no hear.

It's not out of lack of need Gunner; believe me. It's been pretty crazy around these parts including Eastern Montana from what I hear. And by the way it's been so busy my name must have gotten pushed up the ladder in the confusion and I made Lieutenant. By the time the dust cleared weeks later and the higher-ups read their email reports, and noticed my new grade on the cc line. I'm sure it was just too late to click the undo button at that point.

Well, I'm pretty sure that's all a big crock of you-know-what, as my Gram would say, and your natural humility is showing through. I'm sure your superiors actually realized your promotion was overdue and were too embarrassed to make a big deal over it. Congratulations. I never doubted it would happen. Fortunately for you; with me and my team hanging around this area has the potential to get a lot crazier in a short period of time, so you may be a general before we're finished.

Do tell? My gut is screaming out to me this protential increase in crazy is not because you're searching for a number of US military deserters crossing the Canadian border disguised as Biker-gang members.

No wonder you made Louie so quickly Gusto. Your gut figured all this out in one phone call.

You're mocking me, right Gunner?

Maybe; especially considering we rarely enjoy ticker-tape welcoming parades from local law enforcement when my team and I suddenly show up in urban areas. They mostly want us gone. So, let's get down to it. You have any contacts with our northern neighbors in the Royal Canadian Mounted or un-Mounted Police that I can piggy back on?

I might. Canda is a fairly large country. Where do you need my contacts?

Starting in Vancouver.

Roger that. Can you give me any details?

We are confident a Mexican drug cartel we have been tracking by eye-in-the-sky is preparing to move a large shipment of their specialty product through the port at Vancouver any day; the majority of the drugs we believe are ultimately destined for the Bakken area.

All of this attention for a load of drugs and drug traffickers?

I knew you were a quick study Gusto.

It's not rocket science Gunner.

Maybe not for you but I just spent a considerable amount of time with an intel guy who treats it like rocket science and has no clue what the potential threats are.

Domestic Terrorism?

Worst imaginable.

I'm on it Gunner. What's the goal?

First: a fishing expedition; quick catch and hold and release; grab a few of the drug delivery crew redhanded without interrupting the flow of product to make their cartel powers-that-be nervous. Then flip accommodating cartel mules who you and your Canadian cohorts will persuade: it's better for the drug mules to remain alive to haul product another day and keep the product moving by becoming honorary and exclusive members of our Confidential Informants Program; as opposed to becoming just another unceremoniously admitted member of the unmarked grave society of the tundra of Canada discovered in the Spring after the thaw and interned in the ground with an unmarked RIP headstone in some far away Northern location.

I gotta say, it's either a brilliant alliance of opposing forces or it's...

I know, I know; Cracker Jacks, Gusto, I know...don't say it: a deal with the devil. As much as it freezes up there in Canada your RCMP contacts should be used to skating on thin ice to get the bad guys; and I mean that in typical Western jargon referring to either gender.

That's some kind of clue about the terror organization, right?

Thanks Gusto, Gunner out.

II***Intuition trumps obfuscation***

MR OBLONSKY are you attempting to tell me in your most unwieldy, verbose, wordy, confusing style of communication; that you are opposed to one of the most experientially, globally-trained-terrorist-terminators in our most trusted and sought after stable of US global operational assets, using a specific strategy to stop terrorism in your sector because your gut tells you it's bad business to leverage any of the drug cartel members to enlist in the CIP to inform Railbak's team and his ATF partners about any potential terrorist activities in the Bakken?

Well, sir although I wouldn't characterize my position on this matter as negatively slanted as you have, but I do believe it's not only bad business but it's probably illegal.

And your wishy-washy attempt at a conclusory legal opinion with your personal judgment on the legality issue is based on what exactly, other than your gut? For instance: perhaps your in-depth study during your 2 years of law school before joining the military in hopes of finishing up your JD at the government's expense and joining the JAG Corps? Because last time I checked you are not in the JAG Corps; you are a civilian operating administrator in the NSA who works for me. And the reason I took this call is out of respect for your family history with me personally and vicariously this agency; since I worked with your step-dad on many field operations. And you may recall I was one of your step-dad's pall bearers at his funeral who was chosen by his peers to be the one to present your mom with your step-dad's service flag.

Yes, I recall very well, Mr. Director. I'm simply calling attention to Railbak's proposed, rather counter-intuitive, unique anti-terrorist strategy, to your attention so that you won't be the last to know what's going on if the situation in the Bakken goes FUBAR.

If this information about Railbak's strategy; characterized by you as counter-intuitive and potentially illegal; is actually a diversionary tactic on your part to CYA, I commend you for your effort Mr. Oblonsky. You have on many occasions exhibited the ability to successfully politicize and CYA your involvement in various NSA missions and not get entangled in the spokes of a mission gone-bad; which you were personally vested in either voluntarily or not. You will go a long way in government service and probably successfully retire with all your body parts intact and with no debits on your account with such a creative approach to agency survival.

Thank you Mr. Director.

Perhaps I'm better at obfuscation than I thought because that was not meant as a compliment. The needs of this country and the NSA are located just a bit higher on the scale of importance than any one person...including you, which may come as a shock. And don't you worry about Railbak. He's never been concerned with bringing anybody down without placing himself in the crosshairs first. Even that FUBAR mission you two were on in West Africa. Railbak personally contacted me and many others directly; accepting responsibility for not overseeing the intel debacle; regardless what he said about you and your people during the investigation or what anyone else's responsibilities were...Railbak always considered every mission he was on as his own. I can't speak for everyone who was contacted during the investigation of that mission but I can speak for myself and a number of others who believed a multitude of unfortunate operational events occurred which spelled failure. Lucky for you because that is why you and others were not invited to stand tall in front of a court-martial panel.

I had no idea Mr. Director.

I know and I can see Railbak smiling in my mind's eye and hearing him say: We're a lot smarter than we look. And hopefully one day you will finally be awarded a Security Clearance Level high enough to allow you to hear this deep-throat agency intel.

Yes Mr. Director.

If I need me to speak slower, let me know. You will give Railbak whatever he needs; including personnel. If you believe you in-turn need written directives from me or the DOJ to comply with what Railbak requests of you or your NSA operatives; let me know and I'll personally ensure we give you a get-out-of-jail-free card to CYA at the highest levels; because you will not be the engineer of this train. Operations strategy will be developed and implemented at a level way above your pay grade. But you will fuel the boiler personally with all the fuel Railbak requests; including the most critical personnel we need to keep this train on track, speeding forward. And just so there is no confusion, I will make sure you are not held responsible for any Bakken operation you had no part in running; which will most likely be all of them. I will do that on behalf off your late step-dad. I simply believe I will die and never be able to repay him for what he did for me during our years operating in the field...including saving my life. Good day Sky.

III

There's no I in CYA

MORT?

Greetings Gunner. Apparently your convo with your buddy Oblonsky is making the rounds inside the NSA.

No surprise...clearly jaded in his favor as usual; especially if Sky is the mouth making the rounds.

Maybe; but don't put a bet down on Sky winning with any of the Vegas odds-makers this time...I don't think so...not this time.

Cracker Jacks. Hold onto something nailed-down cause if your opinion is correct, it could be earth-shaking.

Get this Gunner; Sky called the Director...

Sky is either a total idiot or suicidal.

...or both. I finally got the skinny on your semi-humorous belief that Oblonsky had an incriminating portfolio of pics at his disposal containing one or more of our military or political leaders in any number of compromising positions with other higher-ups within the US intelligence community...

...or hired-ups in the the low-intelligence community.

Riiiiight...what Sky has per my discovery is way more powerful than your scenario.

Cracker Jacks.

My information is Sky's step-father was a global contract operator used on many a mission for various US agencies including the CIA and the NSA. You name a US agency with even the remote need for under-the-radar intel; and Sky's step-dad probably worked on projects for them; both domestic and foreign. I've obtained intel that suggests Sky's step-dad worked periodically for the Office of Naval Intelligence on any number of projects as diverse as investigating nuclear sub and aircraft carrier production costs to infiltrating major arms dealers operating in international waters as pirates off the coast of Somalia. This prolific dark-ops agent was known to only a handful of intel handlers in the US. He legally adopted our Mr Oblonsky after a clandestine marriage to Sky's mother in Atlantic City; when our fave Sky was very young. But strategically never changed Sky's last name and mom retained her unmarried name as well; so the relationship remained secure to the outside world. We suspect step-dad did so intentionally predicting the future; concluding if no connection was ever made between the two families, step-dad could reduce the opportunities for any bad guys from

discovering his secret marriage and applying leverage to step-dad in the event he was ever captured. To complete the ruse, step-dad maintained a separate apartment in Baltimore and had his own PO Box as Sky and mom maintained a home in Virginia for many years.

Cracker Jacks. Did you know about the step-dad Mort?

No, this guy was super-stealthy and mysterious to boot. I'm still ferreting out data including one anecdotal rumor suggesting he was a known double-agent servicing at least one non-US government. One of Sky's step-dad's closest mission partners and cover advocates was allegedly the present NSA Director, who, reputedly, according to my old-school spy sources who noted in direct conversations with me that our super-secret agent saved the present NSA Director's bacon on more than one occasion.

Now it all makes sense Mort. How a screw-up like Sky could survive not being court-martialed and drummed out of the military after his intel fiasco on that mission in West Africa; where Chief was KIA; and still remain employed in the US intel community as a civilian.

Maybe he has good qualities Gunner; that are just hidden like his step-dad's

Cracker Jacks. Now you remind me of Sarafina, who BTW would defend a guilty-felon's right to a second opportunity to do good if he or she showed a scintilla of the GR8. But I'll guarantee you from experience; Sky would bring my team's average score on GR8 qualities much closer to 0 than 8.

Ha. Well, Gunner, I'll bet Sarafina wouldn't take the same protective stance on Bastillia's behalf.

Point taken...maybe Sarafina's insights are gender-driven.

I don't think so Gunner, I think Sarafina knows evil when she sees it and understands there is no forgiveness for evil efforts, regardless of gender. A terrorist perp like Bastillia can be as contrite as possible and produce tears on command but Sarafina knows that ability is evil's ultimate weapon: make good

people believe evil people operate like good people with a full tool box of genetics and GR8; including genuine contrition for missteps. Instead of being merely another example of evil's manipulative methods to sway good people to act with mercy; which evil equates as the ultimate weakness.

Cracker Jacks Mort. Now you are scaring me because I know you must be listening in on my pre-op team meetings: No forgiveness for evil....not ever. Evil has no capacity for contrition; it's a missing gene.

What do you need from me Gunner?

First off, Mort, we need a bit of dimensional-intel on the most notorious Mexican drug cartels operating in Mexico's Northern states and/or Baja who could handle the logistics and financial weight required for a major heroine or cocaine wholesale-product-run to the Bakken through Canada via port-of-entry Vancouver.

Precipitously, we'll consider any data also suggesting a specific Cartel which may entertain terror affiliates in the Americas as partners in the enforcement aspect of product payment. We understand terror is in the hearts of all drug cartels but usually it's firmly within the economic framework of drug-market wars and not ideologically based on political issues. Just like lifting fingerprints from unknown participants on murder weapons, we want to know there are more than ghosts involved instead of chasing our gut instincts and missing a personal relationship between a given Cartel and known Terrorist group involved in drug shenanigans; especially during the early stages of this pre-op investigation, no matter how obscure. That way we won't be shocked when we get ambushed later by some group unknown to us that enjoys a tenuous affiliation with a Cartel. I learned that lesson one time, in West Africa, and as tragic a lesson as it was, it taught my team we have to be involved in every aspect of supply-chain-intel gathering or face dire consequences. We want to be in-the-know sooner than later during this virtual slippery hill climb upward, especially with a whole lot of blind corners; so the fall to the bottom won't be as steep if and when we get ambushed, since we'll at least be semi-prepared.

Roger that Gunner. We'll start working from the ground...or water...up. Be safe; because you and your crew are going to be primarily on your own. I can tell you we've tracked critical preparation data on many of the local police forces located in the small cities in the Bakken and since the downturn in oil production and the slowdown in population and economics, they are sorely unprepared for what you are anticipating from Bastillia; or any type of potential terrorist threat.

Roger that—just as we suspected. I need one more favor.

You call it Gunner.

Do you remember those two assets you provided for my team when we were on the kidnapping mission in Africa?

I do...Bititi and Osita, I believe. I've used them a few times since that op with good reports from the primary operators.

Think you can see if they are available for the near term and reach out for data from their US handlers if they have an opinion on whether they believe if these two would be amenable or effective working with my civilian team here in the barren Bakken.

Can do. What's your goal?

Look, Mort, I'm thinking if Bastillia is in the Bakken even in a subtle fashion, checking out potential members for her terrorist team; maybe we get out in front of their recruitment strategy and place a couple of non-native Northern US tier types in positions with wild-catter oil types who will stand out as potential recruiting targets for Bastillia's tastes; in a crowd of otherwise Caucasian oil-patch workers. Maybe she is as arrogant as they say and Bastillia will never suspect we are setting her up to have sources within her group to provide us intel directly from the source in real time.

Or just maybe Gunner she's even more arrogant than that and will suspect you planted them and Bastillia will be convinced she can flip them to work as double-agents.

Even better. My money would be on Bititi and Osita. Better get me a full background on all the missions those two have been involved in since we used them in Africa. And Mort, in spite of what I said to Sky, this part of the strategy goes no further than us. I'll have to try it on my team before we launch.

Roger that.

Gunner out.

IV

Sky's the Limit

MR OBLONSKY?

Sendham, can you round-up your intel partner, Sarafina, and come to my office?

It's Snedham, Sir, and we'll be there as soon as I round her up. Any prep work we need to do before we meet.

No. I just want to spit-ball some concepts with you two.

Roger that.

WHAT'S UP Sned?

Sarafina, hey your fave boss, Oblonsky wants us for a conceptual spit-ball meeting in his office.

In other words, Sned, he has absolutely no plan or agenda for this spontaneous gathering.

As per normal.

How do you want to play it Sned?

Let him take the lead and I'll ask some piercing questions before he starts pontificating and it gets weird. Then you can get frustrated, tell him you'll be back when he articulates the structure for the meeting.

That's all I ever do.

That's why you're so good at it Sarafina. And he takes it from you where with me he always threatens to send me somewhere like Guam or Nome, neither of which I'm fairly certain he could locate on a map.

Sounds like a sound strategy, Sned. I'm proud to play a pivotal part.

Enough alliteration already and you don't need to show off your salient sarcasm to me.

You should hear me do it in several languages...always catchy with diverse international audiences.

I'll bet.

You hear from our fave civilian operator? I have a feeling this meeting is not a coincidence with Railbak's rumored involvement in the Bakken. I suspect he's pushing a bunch of Sky's buttons. He doesn't contact me directly much unless it's in person as he believes the NSA tracks my calls.

That's why Railbak is still current and in demand for dicey ops...because he observes everything and then acts accordingly. Simple and smart. I saw Railback earlier today making his way to Oblonsky's office.

Well, maybe you and I are going to finally have some fun after all here in the Bakken, Sned.

No doubt. I'll meet you at Oblonsky's office. I'm finishing up an e-mail for Sky re: my intel activities last week. It shouldn't be more than a paragraph long. I figured I'd be on a plane out of here by now if nobody showed interest in the alleged connection between the downturn in Bakken oil production and the potential uptick in terrorism as integral parts of a potential longer-term Bastillia-run terrorist operation in the Bakken.

You and me both. Maybe Railbak has a plan.

Sarafina, you and I both know. Railbak always has a plan...usually more than one. He gets out in front of himself better than any dark operator I've ever known.

You are the one to know better than anyone.

I like to try and create operational visions like Railbak does but nobody turns the kaleidoscope patterns as successfully as he does. If anyone is in the know about Railbak's potential mission strategies even before his ops teams, it's Mort.

Even before Railbak's operational teams?

Absolutely, you know as well as I do, Railbak's military and civilian teams have rarely cared how risky, how crazy, how close to the 70% solution for success Railbak's plans are. Now that Railbak is a civilian contractor, as long as the Trio is included and AJJB is in the loop, the rest is academic...it's a go. Garnering real-time intel almost anywhere in the globe is Mort's specialty and retasking eyes-in-the-sky is second nature for him.

Ha...point taken.

Roger that. Let's visit our Bakken Boss and see how far behind he is.

MORT? THIS IS Bititi...you called?

Are you on a secure line? And how's your schedule?

Right, SAT phone used exclusively by this Nigerian agency. I'm involved in what I consider a minor stake-out for a national Nigerian security agency, sitting on some low level scumbag gun-runners suspected of supplying a cell in Abuja who may have ties to the Hausa people desiring to expand their terrorist activities into the streets of the capital.

Busy girl.

Busy Hausas. We've already identified attempted expansion of Hausa ops from Northern Nigeria through cells in Cameroon, Cote d'Ivoire, Chad, Togo, Ghana, Sudan, Gabon and Senegal. Many are wanna-be's at this point but the usual angry, jihadist-style saber-rattling uptick in the chat groups on the dark internet spooked Nigerian security agencies into tracking them. I dare say the best part for me is, we don't have the same legal constraints on individual rights that bad people in the US enjoy.

That's what makes us so great...and complicated. But then; consider that's why we have folks like Railbak on our side.

Railbak requested me?

Let's just say I'm inquiring as your name came up in conversation.

If it's a Railbak op, I'm in.

What about your Nigerian op?

I'm always in demand for this stuff...the Railbak ops only send my stock soaring and I'm suddenly independent to make my own decisions when I let my superiors know who I'll be working with.

Roger that. Railbak is well known in West Africa. Hey, are you going to use the longest alias in history used by a dark operative?

Funny, Mort. You've been talking to Tc?

I talk to everyone. The feedback from Railbak's crew; to a man; is they loved having you with them on that kidnap-recovery op you-all worked a while back, or I wouldn't be making this call.

Riiiiight. They just like to laugh at me...

...with you.

I wasn't laughing.

You will when they remind you.

Uh-oh, here comes a couple of my bad guys. Gotta run. Let me know the sched and where.

Roger that. Look Bititi, real quick, Osita seems to have dropped off the map. Have him give me a shout when you contact him.

What makes you think I know where Osita is?

Cause you're considered omniscient in West Africa and the fewer people who know about my inquiries the better including my usual contacts.

You flatter me Mort. Fatoumata-Binta out.

Bititi, Bititi...don't you think for a minute you got the last word, if you are still on-line. Dammit Bititi. Big Blonde, AJJB, Sarafina...and now Bititi...and probably Yasmina. Bastillia won't have a chance...and neither will the Gunner.

Hopefully the Cartel and the terrorists won't either, Mort. And you should make sure the SAT phone isn't receiving before you inject your infamous mumbling. Out...maybe.

Nice trick.

BITITI?

It's Railbak, Mort. What's going on with Bititi?

Nothing that an entire female US Seal Team or your ops team couldn't handle.

Cracker Jacks Mort, have you been counting the gender of our operators we may have on this mission? Why, because you think this op is morphing into being controlled by the fearsome fivesome?

It never hit me until after I contacted Bititi. When I decided to have Bititi contact Osita directly to contact me; I realized only a few guys were involved in the mission; esp since we have no idea who is involved with whom on the terrorist side beyond Bastillia; especially in West and North Africa. I told Bititi nothing about the op other than it was under your direction; so whatever you and your crew did with her in Africa, she's sold, and in.

We let her be herself.

Oh boy, we're screwed Gunner; cause all the other females already act like themselves.

So you feel bad for Bastillia already?

Funny; but mostly I feel bad for us.

Speak for yourself. I've got the Captain to control this Alpha leadership group of female operators.

You mean assassins...

I didn't want to file their broad skill-set specialties down to such a fine point.

Heaven help us if there's a mutiny, Gunner; come to think of it...heaven help you...I'll be waaaay out of range at all times. BTW, I heard Cap made Major before he got out.

Force of habit calling him Cap. I'll get Cleats involved as Cap's security...

To protect him from the opposing forces or his own team?

...ha... and Cleats has waaaay better weaponry than everyone else. Here's a top secret for you. Cap actually transferred to the Montana National Guard from the

Army as a Major so he's technically still in. Shall we say Cap operates with a certain amount of flexibility which is a-ok with his Guard superiors as long as he shows up periodically in uniform and instructs Guardsmen and Guardswomen on general, unclassified anti-terrorist activities both domestic and foreign. And Cap periodically leads Guard soldiers in training exercises; such as Biathlon competitions in places like Vermont; during drill weekends that sometimes look very familiar to me.

Brilliant.

And besides, with Cap's contacts, maybe we'll get to borrow a Blackhawk or a Bradley from the Guard once in a while considering the Bakken is also technically located in Eastern Montana.

Ohmyohmyohmy Gunner, Oblonsky would shit if your team showed up in either one; especially a freakin tank; in his beloved Bakken. The Committee will have me on the hot seat for sure...but it sounds like fun.

Well, get the tissue ready for Sky, cause a Bradley in the Bakken may be just what the doctor ordered for one of Cap's; I mean the Major's; two-week summer drill Guard training exercises. Sorry Mort, got a call coming in I have to take. More later. Gunner out.

RAILBAK.

Boss, it's Osita. Bititi suggested I give you a shout.

Boss, huh? I see you learned well during your last mission with my team. Good to hear from you Osita.

I was hoping I'd get another chance to work with you and your crew; and Bititi seemed fairly positive you would have an opportunity for me.

Well, we're mostly civilians now but we're still involved in some fairly dicey operations. We enjoy even more autonomy than prior engagements since we

don't have those Cracker Jacks military rules to abide by and we have very-advanced weaponry. How's your sched?

I'm finishing-up testifying before a military court-martial against a group of military brass representing African governments who mistakenly confused private capitalism with governance oversight. And just as an aside, if you and your team operate more autonomously under the DOJ and NSA than you did under the guise of the UCMJ this op has all the makings of a boatload of fun. I'm in if you'll have me Gunner.

What's the result of your testimony?

I'm proud to say no question there will be a number of wives and families of former high-ranking military officers living on significantly less income for the rest of their lives. And your Western concept of doing-time will be experienced-up-close-and-personal by these former officers' in their immediate and long-term futures in surroundings potentially more dangerous than any op they've ever experienced.

How many officers?

Couple generals, a few colonels and a smattering of lesser ranks who muled the illicit money to Swiss bank accounts from drug-cartel producers busted by military operators; for a slice of the cash liberated from the drug lords. Low-tech operations which showed how arrogant the military was as they believed they were above the law; characterized by delivering drug product from North Africa to the Euro-zone via the Med in military water-transports which was not suspected by the authorities for months; especially with all the refugee water traffic. But over time the rumors circulated and the clandestine military operatives got too greedy and that's when I got summoned to infiltrate strategic aspects of the illegal operations and obtain intel as an under-cover operative. These low-echelon mules were depositing millions in various currencies in Switzerland by the time we blew the racket wide open.

Cracker Jacks; nice work Osita.

Thanks, Boss, high praise coming from you; but to be honest, it probably wouldn't hurt my anticipated life-longevity to get out of North Africa for a long-bit; so if your mission is beyond the borders of my usual area of operations, it won't bother me at all.

Oo-rah. You can count on the fact that the op is beyond the borders of your usual area of operations...and considering the teeming populations of most North and West African urban areas and the ethnicities you are familiar with; I can almost guarantee you this op is well beyond your imagination as well. I'll let you know when we anticipate mission launch. Contact me when you're finished testifying and we'll get you out of the proverbial frying pan and prepped to get back into the field of fire.

Sounds intriguing Boss. Where did you say you were calling from?

I didn't..gotta take this call Osita. I'll be in touch. Gunner out.

V

Right people-right places

THANKS FOR COMING in you two. I wanted to give you a heads-up about a recent strategy for the Bakken; while it is in sleep mode to all but a few of us planning the strategy; which may involve the NSA. I know we have had our moments of

disagreement about mission goals but I believe you two have always spoken your minds truthfully and I want you to know I appreciate your forthrightness.

That's all we have been trained to do, now we want to make sure you've participated in the same training.

Meaning, Send?

It's Sned, Sir. I'm a bit confused...forthrightness...with us?

Believe me-what Sned means is we both appreciate your candor immensely.

Thank you for your vote of confidence Sarafina.

You are welcome. I think what Sned is suggesting, is you need to let us know what this meeting is really concerning. For instance; spit-balling concepts for the next step in the NSA's approach to intel-gathering in the Bakken is what normally would have occurred at the beginning of the downturn as the economy faltered. So, what's really up?

This is precisely why you two are meeting with me. I've been in touch with the Director and he agrees if there is a good time to get a sleeper terrorist cell or cells integrated into the Bakken community; now is the time.

The NSA Director sounds like a smart fellow.

He's very intuitive, Sarafina, and a big supporter of this office as the lightning rod for all intel gathering in the Bakken and its surrounding area; including Canada and its oil-shale/diamond operations.

Canada? With all due respect, kind of outside our approved scope of operations isn't it?

The Director feels like we'll need some private contractors or additional agency alliances to give us a hand and at the same time ensure we don't stretch our constitutional boundaries so as to unnecessarily offend our favorite Northern neighbor.

Private contractors? Any names contemplated by our newest bud, the Director as yet?

Matter of fact, one of your close associates: Railbak.

I'm surprised, Sir, knowing the Director has as much intel as all of us, he must know your last dark ops mission was with Railbak when you were both still in the military. We have seen the reports and are well aware Railbak was not pleased with the intel aspect of the mission. Although no blame was assessed specifically, wasn't your team's responsibility intel, Sir?

Railbak took full responsibility for the mission outcomes, Sarafina.

Clearly.

So, now that Sarafina and I know how insightful and omniscient the Director is, what does that have to do with us mere intel-data strategists?

The Director sees the need for local NSA to work in concert with Railbak's team.

In concert WITH Railbak's team?...or; FOR Railbak's team? Whose op is it? Who has lead?

We'll do our part and Railbak and ATF will be on point.

So it's Railbak's op.

It's a political distinction, Sned, for distribution purposes.

Definitely Railbak's op.

No need to split hairs here, Sarafina.

Then why involve BATF; that's an agency that never splits hairs because they enjoy a full head of hair, independently styled.

Simple; the op will enjoy the status of the hierarchy of a federal agency which is not constrained by boundaries or borders to expose the op to enhanced scrutiny; by either state or federal inquiring bodies.

Optics suggest the DOJ will also be involved.

Depends on what we uncover.

Sounds fairly fluid to Sned and I. Which means it's definitely Railbak's op.

Look, Sarafina, you two will perform your jobs and provide intel as required by any of the agencies or teams or whomever is involved and interface with Railbak; as I have been tasked by the Director to keep him updated on all our activities here in the Bakken so my plate is stacked up like a Las Vegas casino buffet.

Mort?

Mort will operate the eyes in the sky.

On whose command?

Railbak's, but Mort will keep me in the loop so I can veto any SAT use not within our bailiwick.

Bailiwick aounds fairly wide open, Mr Oblonsky. Under which part of our unboundaried, unbordered bailiwicks do you anticipate implementing a veto?

Terrorists are fairly wide open in their terrorism, Sarafina, so as we sit here today I can't anticipate the detail which will require an executive veto but as you both know these ops have the potential to go FUBAR when you least expect it.

Yes, we've both seen the movie; The A Team; and all three of us have experienced ops gone FUBAR. But far-be-it-for-us to question an op leader of Railbak's international creds when it comes to intel gathering whether it be from the ground up or the sky down.

Right. Questions? Send?

It's Sned,sir. Frankly, continuing the Las Vegas buffet line metaphor; too many to chose from. What say we just contact Railbak and inform him we've received an in-depth briefing from you, representing the powers that be and have him let us know what he needs in the way of intel. We can tell him you and the Director have

given us the go-ahead to remove any middle-men from slowing up the intel-gathering and delivery process so data will flow directly to him when requested from us and we'll keep you in the loop. As you and your cohorts are busy enough chasing all the potential threats we're presently being requested through channels without looking for room on your plates for a trip through the dessert line.

Sounds good to me, Send.

Right, sir.

VI

Jeopardy

OK SNED, why don't you and Sarafina do a work-up for me; the Cliff's Notes version; of potential cartel targets in the US that might be inclined to be part of an alliance in the flourishing drug market with any known Mexican cartels operating in the Bakken or with an inclination to operate once the price of crude escalates and the Bakken wild-catters start pumping oil like well-water again. The Trio will be on site soon in the Bakken and your data will give them a framework to operate in; and introduce themselves to the local bad folks while collecting data; so the Big Blonde doesn't begin by laying waste to the entire oil patch by employing her unique approach to crime-stopping; brass first...questions later.

Your preliminary data and the Trio's detail will allow the three of us to strategize with Mort on his most efficient use of the eyes-in-the-sky as we eliminate potential

targets as too small or disinterested; and we can always contact Donny for periodic use of his extensive contacts on the ground to confirm our suspicions. Agreed?

Roger Gunner.

RB, how much data and how often do we give Sky progress reports?

No worries Sarafina. I'll deal directly with Sky and hopefully he won't spend too much time trying to squeeze data from you two. I'll try and be sympathetic to not jeopardize your relationship with your boss here in the Bakken but I plan on having only intermittent dealings with him and passing him no critical op data.

All due respect Gunner, I don't think Sarafina and I have ever experienced the same jeopardy your teams are exposed to each time they are on a mission. When the weapons go hot they are for sure in harm's way. We're just pleased to be part of a purposeful mission instead of tracking oil-patch bad-guys and their oil-patch shenanigans such as drilling outside their approved mineral rights; and ultimately handing the target data off to the feds or local authorities for use in citation and punishment. We don't mind being an integral part of this bureaucratic US alliance but we'd sure like to be at the finish line occasionally instead of stuck under the starting pistol race after race.

Cracker Jacks, Sned, I wish I could clone you and Sarafina a couple dozen times over so we could dedicate our real-time trusted intel to formulating a viable strategy for mission success before we find ourselves halfway through a mission and discover a percentage of our intel is too weak to go the distance; or we're firing from defensive positions instead of attacking.

Roger that Boss.

The deal with identifying potential relationships between an extreme-ideologically-driven terrorist group led by a global-class strategist like Bastillia and a pure profit-driven entity such as a drug cartel is a clash of ideologues, not tactics. Both are blood-thirsty with a no-prisoners type mentality. It's just that its flare versus fear. Bastillia is the terrorist savant trying to dent the external

protections of the billion dollar defense industry protecting the most powerful country in the world using shadowy, stealthy guerilla tactics; while the drug cartels simply desire to virtually carpet-bomb any group in its way using the light of the moon or the sun at noon, so they can gain access to the billion dollar economics of the US drug market. It's either the perfect alliance or it'll self destruct. Hopefully the latter.

Roger that Gunner. In the US there are approximately 30 organizations active in medium to large-scale drug distribution. I used a numerically-based calculation assigning numbers to various data points such as organizational strength, active cells, breadth of operation, alliances with producers, etc, and removed a large number of the known organizations from a Northern Mexico, Western US and Canada logistical drug delivery operation because they just didn't score high enough as the top half dozen. One of the characteristics of the highest scorers was the organizational style of the cartels operating in the US suggesting they attached a high percentage of their operations to funding a network of Falcons, Hitmen, Lieutenants and Drug Lords or Capos. For instance, any of the traditional motorcycle gangs and other known US bangers; such as the Bandidos, Hell's Angels, Pagans, Outlaws MC, Mongols MC, Vagos MC, Bloods, Crips, and Vice Lords; fell out of the equation as potential allies with a Bastillia-style terrorist group because they spend a significant amount of their energy and revenues to involve their gangs in various criminal activities other than hard drugs. Ideologically or geographically unharmonious groups fell out of the equation for various reasons including the lack of breadth of their drug operations; such as Gangster Disciples, Vice Lords, Aryan Brotherhood, Nuestra Familia, Yakuza, Triads, Black Guerilla Family, Black Mafia Family, 18th Street Gang, Logan Heights Gang and Texas Syndicate.

You will hear terms like Halcones, Sicarios, Lugartenientes and Capos in reference to successful drug cartel operations.

- *In English: Falcons, Hitmen, Lieutenants and Drug Lords. Successful and large drug organizations have strict almost militaristic top-down hierarchies.*

- *Drug Lords are clearly the Generals of drug cartel organizations responsible for the entire drug operation.*
- *Lieutenants run territories within their drug cartel and enjoy 2nd in command status under Capos. Generally, Lieutenants supervise Hitmen and Falcons.*
- *Hitmen are the armed group with a drug cartel. Responsible for various acts of violence from assassinations to protection rackets. Hitmen are charged with defense of a particular area (plaza) from rival drug cartels and the military.*
- *Falcons are considered the eyes and ears of street activities within the drug cartels area of operations; with special emphasis placed on reporting to the cartel higher-ups, the movements of police, military and rival drug cartels. Falcons are considered the lowest rank in drug cartels but none-the-less invaluable to the success of a cartel's business.*

If I may; anecdotal evidence pertinent to Mexico's various political administrations, suggests its posture at present is unsupportive of use by federal police of what the President and his advisors consider excessive force during anti-drug enforcement operations. The NY Times reported in August this year, Mexico's President fired Enrique Galindo, its federal police chief, after a report surfaced that the police allegedly summarily killed at least 22 suspects in a raid last year on a drug gang hideout. The critical questions left unanswered by the Mexican's President's summary termination decision include: who, what, when, where and why?

Unfortunately, I believe the plethora of answers; according to our intel; could include that the Mexican political administration; at the very least at the middle-advisor level; could be involved in a graft pattern of cartel protection for their drug operations in exchange for hefty payments from one or more drug cartels. Let's be honest, it's a very profitable industry and trickle-down economic positively affecting many people who otherwise would probably not receive income from any source.

Right on, Sarafina. The research has not pinpointed which drug cartel used the supposed drug gang hideout but if and when we find out, we'll search for a connection between any of the federal police higher-ups or administration key decision-makers and the drug cartel membership using the hideout. This research is fairly murky but it would be helpful to know how many fronts we may end up fighting on if we start busting up a politically-connected cartel during our leverage strategy.

Cracker Jacks, Sned. That would add a layer of energy-sapping political endeavor to this battle, none of us need. Perhaps there will a job for Sky in this conflict after all.

Heaven help us.

Back to the drug cartels; bridesmaids based on my numbers who are fairly well known on either side of the US/Mexico border: MS-13; LA EME; MexiKanami; Nortenos 14; PEN1; Surenos 13.

Los Zetas tied for the top spot regardless that it has split into rival factions: Grupo Bravo and Vieja Escuela Z. Finishing a close second is CDN (Cartel Del Noreste). The amount of weaponry brandished in the fight for control of the plaza of Breitbart Texas and Nuevo Laredo suggests this war is well-financed by at least 2 of the 3 cartels mentioned and is lucrative enough to attract armies of hitmen whose mission is obviously to sweep out any competition created by a brief vacuum in leadership resulting from the Los Zetas split. There is also rumor of another amalgam of Lieutenants and Hitmen who have banded together in response to the Los Zetas split, from formerly competing cartels to form a super-star cartel with the reputed goal to handle market demands for high-end cocaine anywhere in North and South America. I'm told this cartel will be a force to be reckoned with during this transitional period. Whether or not they are behind the current supply of drugs making their way up to Vancouver via a water highway is unknown at present. We're working feverishly to get a profile on this alleged new cartel.

Next step Gunner; may be to clearly identify and ultimately bust-up the delivery route we've targeted into Canada from the Baja and determine if any of the 3 winners; or the newest creation of evil; of my lottery algorithm are in alliance with the drug producers and suppliers bringing the product to the market across the water. What my research suggests is that there are supply chain logistics; specialists in addition to drug producers and suppliers; operating in a loose alliance with the basic drug cartel structure; which features financiers, money launderers and arms suppliers.

Cracker Jacks, Sned. No wonder these groups are so hard to sweep off the landscape. Each organization is characterized not only as a multi-tentacled octopus but multi-headed as well. If one cartel goes away, the producers, suppliers, financiers, money launderers and arms suppliers just redirect their efforts to the multitude of viable drug cartels still in business who will always be delighted to in-fill the sudden gap in supply left vacant because of a cartel's forced business failure or reorg.

It's the ultimate pyramid scheme, Gunner. With such a broad-base built on many willing providers from diverse, global geographies for a perennially unsatisfied market, as long as demand for the product remains bullish, no way the present scheme will ever be toppled removing one building block at a time. Good news is Mort has made positive initial in-roads with the BTAF&E (Bureau of Tobacco, Alcohol, Firearms and Explosives); INS (US Immigration and Naturalization Service); and US Customs and Border Protection for shared intel. These agencies are particularly pleased to get in on the SAT intel Mort controls especially now that we'll be focusing on traffic moving in and out of both the Northwestern and Southwestern US borders.

Look you two, as curious as it is and we don't want to be sending out thank-you cards to all our opposing players; but what I used to preach to my USMC teams still holds true: without evil, we're out of business. Ironically, the good news; for those of us who love what we do; is there's enough evil present in the globe, allowing us to continue sweeping it from the face of the earth until we can no longer operate a broom.

It's that simple Gunner. Better us manning the keyboards and more lethal weaponry than Oblonsky; at this level of terrorist interdiction. Perfect example is one of the top scorers in the results of my research, as I mentioned previously, is the organization without a formal name. They might be just what the doctor ordered for this leverage operation of ours if the newest cartel willing to to take a risk with us to get a toe-hold in the Bakken or Canadian Oil-Shale operation during the down-turn. Perhaps the new group will see us as their leverage if we play this correctly.

How so?

We provide them with ready-for-market-product from a legit-bust and confiscation; courtesy of the owners of the Canadian-bound shipment we're tracking.

Is that legal?

Depends on the eyes of the beholder, Sned...we'll just argue with the DOJ that it's an integral step in the contrived conspiracy aspect of our mission to eradicate drugs and terror from the oil-patch.

Wow. This could definitely be a fun mission, eh, Sarafina?

Oh right, if we can keep Railbak and mission-control-Mort from wandering too deep into its own creative-conspiracy-quagmire and dragging us knee deep in the shit without any wader boots.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina, all you have to do is supply real-time intel and we'll do the rest.

Riiiiight and who gets us a get-out-of-jail-free card? You know Lover, sometimes I wonder how you survived this long without someone performing a pre-frontal lobotomy on your cranium; especially when the neuro surgeon specialists were inside that huge noggin of yours and elected to pass on the front part of your brain.

Relax, Sarafina, we're simply exploring options and I think Sned has identified an avenue which can accelerate our accessibility to the underbelly of the drug world in the oil-patch which will allow us to acquire intel from the inside instead of the outside with the Trio and Cleats blowing stuff up...both virtually and literally.

Let's withhold our desire to prejudge any of the potential approaches to discover if Bastillia is making a preliminary move into the Bakken using her established approach of creating sleeping cells. The drugs are already here and eradicating the cartels may prove to be the bonus. Could be the cartels are creating a distribution center in the Bakken while it's quiet and when the oil-patch fires up again it'll be a major North American marketplace.

Alright RB, I'll defer to you for now but I'm watching you like a falcon so I don't get drugged; no pun intended; into a scenario which ruins my semi-successful career esp since it's the only one I have at the moment.

Thanks for the extreme vote of confidence Sarafina.

Moving on folks if I can break up this domestic love fest and get to work; I do enough spit-balling with our bud and current local boss Sky. I'm off to get as much intel as possible on this new cartel. I'll keep you both in the loop. When I know anything you'll know it and I'll trust you to ferret the intel you need Gunner and share with Sky whatever you think he should have.

Roger that, Sned, good luck.

Dinner tonight RB?

Unsure Sarafina, I think the Trio will start drifting in.

And O and your stupid dog too?

Now Sarafina it's not a matter of priorities it's a matter of logistics. We want to move quick and hard. If Bastillia is here she's already got a leg-up on us so as usual we're playing catch up. Behind Bastillia is not a good place to be considering the kind of organization she has a habit of controlling; the wake her activities are wide and deep and nefarious.

Look, Sarafina, I'll leave you and Sned to do what you do best and I'll hit the safe house and locate our incoming friendlies. Contact me if you get lucky.

The only way I'm going to get lucky in this crowd is with you RB.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina. We're on a tactical mission of national security.

You have your dimensional mission and I have mine RB.

That's precisely what I'm afraid of.

Hellooooooo, as entertaining as it is, whenever you two are done with your domestic squabble; I want to give Mort a shout on my SAT phone without any background noise to make him nervous.

Roger that Sned...show me gone.

MORT.

Mort, it's Sned in NoDak.

Are you secure?

Roger that. I'm on my SAT phone.

What's your pleasure? Railbak said I'm supposed to give you the highest priority.

Wow, that's better than I get in my own office, Mort.

Considering you share an office with the dynamic Sarafina I don't doubt it.

Ha. Touche Mort.

So Sned, enlighten me; any luck putting a face or faces on the theoretical, shiney, new-no-name Mexican cartel?

Not yet, but as you can guess that's why I'm contacting you. There is an inordinate amount of chatter on the dark net specifically regarding the battle for control of access to US/Mexico drug transport through Nuevo Laredo and Breitbart, Texas.

As usual, Sarafina's multiple language skills come in handy; even here in inland, land-locked, exceedingly white, English speaking NoDak. I'm thinking we should continue following our fearless leader's intuitive, contrarian approach to this potential terrorist/drug cartel alliance and figure out which cartel or cartels from amongst the favorites of my algorithm aren't involved in this old and tiresome battle for control of the traditional, well worn over-land drug delivery route into the heartland of the US from Mexico; straight up the gut; but instead have called an end run; or end swim; to get into the end zone.

Hmmm, process of elimination...I like it; just may work Sned especially if you ever take a breath when you are talking. Maybe some ad-hoc drug-related-group began that end-run through Baja and Canada to get to the Northern tier US oil-patch drug markets; perhaps trying their luck on the path of least resistance? Same concept in war to circumventing a Maginot Line-like fortress instead of taking on the battle-ready powers associated with USA law enforcement.

Why not, Mort? I'm thinking it started as an idea among a few of the more aggressive Lieutenants exchanging ideas; and saving their own bacon by not killing off their own hitmen and maybe it gelled into a cartel of destiny as the cracks in the more well-known cartels virtual armor turned into fissures and ultimately splits. I'm breathing Mort-ha. Maybe we see who of our favorite drug cartel Lieutenants isn't concentrating his assets on controlling the known Southernmost US border drug entry points.

How can I help?

Run me a 24-hour loop of the urban battles around Breitbart and Nuevo Laredo and we'll comb the footage for gang and cartel colors; tactics; participant's facial recognition for known falcons, hitmen and Lieutenants among the living and dead; vehicle licensure and ownership; familiar weaponry, etc.; and see what jumps out at us. We'll also obtain the local morgue, police and hospital reports from our sources and perform the same review.

Done. Good luck Sned. If Sky pings me for a status report on this mission our conversation never took place and I have no new data at this point.

Thanks Mort, I'm out.

Mort out.

OK SARAFINA, Mort's on point to get us eye-in-the-sky views of the Texas two-step turmoil. It may take us a while but if we get a few of Railbak's non-Trio assets to give us a few extra eyeballs on this streaming data we'll knock it over in no time.

Excellent work Sned.

I haven't done anything yet except play ring-master to the circus act starring you and Railbak in the center ring.

But it's a fun way to make a living Sned.

I can't imagine being your children...but I want to be around to watch them grow up.

Don't even go there Sned.

You know it's a given inevitability Sarafina. I've never seen two people more in love and more committed to each other.

Rubbish. The only thing RB is committed to is the next mission.

You forget...I'm an expert at human behavior. Just because my love life isn't trending doesn't mean it doesn't stream in the privacy of my own...

Dreams?

I prefer, uh...fantasies.

You are a wonderful man Snedham. And I love you.

I know. Unrequited love; and besides; I'm well aware Railbak has an entire Trio of enforcers at his beck-and-call and a beast full of automatic weapons at his disposal to protect his interests from interlopers-mwahaha.

Well said. Although I'm sure with you he would be kinder and gentler and let his crew warn you first.

You mean threaten. I don't even want to deal with his dog. I can assure all concerned that the wimpy tech guy is no threat whatsoever and although a lover, not a fighter; in this case, neither.

I do love you Sned.

VII

que es los que se

SO BITITI, how did you and Osita have the dubious distinction of getting entangled with Railbak and his teams?

We were assets for hire on one of Railbak's missions in Africa Mr Snedham.

You must have made an impression on Railbak and his team to be asked for an encore performance.

So everyone says Mr Snedham.

Sned will do.

Yes Sned.

Does Osita speak or are you the English translator?

Osita just likes to get going on the mission work and not waste time with small talk. Plus he gets confused with the language thing. Not the words or syntax; the lack of dimensionality. He doesn't understand how people can survive only speaking a couple of languages.

Really, how many does Osita speak?

Nobody knows, Osita works actively in a half dozen African countries with different dialects and all over Western and Central Europe. I even overheard him carrying on a conversation in Yiddish on his SAT phone one day.

How'd you know it was Yiddish?

I speak it.

Whoa. You both will do nicely. You two just arrive in our beautiful North Dakota?

Railbak just dropped us off outside your office before he went to locate the Trio and told us to come in and get to work. Somebody will pick us up later.

Typical Railbak...no time for small talk either.

Suits Osita just fine.

How'd you get here?

Separate private jets from Africa. We both landed in Minneapolis at an FBO hidden in plain sight among the many corporate jets and then each of us was flown to town in single engine jobs just like oil administrators from a home office somewhere further South. And here we are.

Sarafina will clue you into the details. We have a precipitous theory that you can help us with as we kick-off this mission.

Railbak explained it on the way in from the airport. Sounds very intriguing.

Hopefully it'll bear fruit. What can I tell you in the way of background about me or Sarafina.

You are regarded highly by Railbak. He says Sned is that guy who will retrieve the intel we need to commence the physical aspect of the mission-strategy; and that's a good enough recommendation for us. We're honored to be here and excited to be part of this mission and lucky to have you on the mission. Unless Railbak is blind I can see on the surface why he'd want Sarafina. Is that too forward to say in your culture? Osita says sometimes I may overstep my cultural boundaries because of my gender and I don't work as much with US operatives as he does.

I agree with everything you said and Railbak has perfect vision. I'm sure this will seem pretty tame for you two compared to what Railbak has had you involved in on his previous missions but it may be the most critical domestic terrorist threat we've ever had to engage in as a country.

This intel gathering aspect of the mission may be a relief; especially if it doesn't involve live ammo, hundreds of territorial warriors, tanks, combat choppers, exploding buildings and being air-lifted to the dubious safety of a speck of a carrier-boat in the middle of the med with Russians in large-automatic weapons bristling airships allegedly operating as rear-air-asecurity-guards.

Jesus, are you sure you'll be satisfied just looking at video for a few days?

Here's the deal Sned: in spite of what Osita thinks; the only difficult thing about me is I only drink vanilla lattes when I can get them and hopefully here I can drink them by the gallon. I won't bore you with what I've eaten on missions in Africa that was still moving because I'm pretty sure I would cross over the US cultural dietary boundaries. Osita is easy and it's my observation he will imbibe anything with caffeine in it from a paper cup; even if there's stuff floating in it. As you can see Osita's already checking out the available tech in the office and heaven knows where he got that paper cup full of stuff he's drinking. And he doesn't have to eat. And he'll work for days grabbing a few hours sleep off and on. The one thing he does like is a comfortable chair because he'll be living in it; and if there is a shower on premises it would be good for him and those of us who have to work with him

because Osita simply won't leave mission-central here as long as there is work to be done; and I'm pretty sure his accepted cultural hygiene issues will overstep your US cultural hygiene boundaries.

Ha, anything else I should know?

American cheeseburgers.

Pardon me.

Osita likes American cheeseburgers with onion, tomato, and ketchup, no mustard and no lettuce; he'll eat them three meals a day.

Osita is going to love NoDak. Best cheeseburgers in the world.

Like I said, the only thing you'll have to do occasionally is check up on Osita's hygiene. He's used to working alone in very rugged parts of the world and he forgets to shower and shave at times when he's in civilization; which I assure you, compared to where we have worked; this is luxurious.

Right, how frequently?

You mean how frequently does Osita forget to shower or how frequently should you check?

Either.

Every 3 or 4 days; don't worry; you'll know by then.

Cracker Jacks.

Ha, the infamous Railbak; Cracker Jacks. We would like to try some Cracker Jacks. We've never had Cracker Jacks.

I think I can fit that in the budget. We're delighted you are a member of our mission team.

Has Railbak given you our mission membership ID yet?

No. What I'm giving you is the National Defense Service Ribbon. Attach it to something close to you...a hat, belt, backpack.

Significance?

As Railbak says I'll give you the back-story. Railbak believes all American servicemen and women want to be heroes. Yet when he was a young Marine, as yet untested in the ways of combat and dark ops the only ribbon he had on his uniform was the National Defense Service ribbon. He was embarrassed to only have one ribbon when many of his older, more experienced Marine team members had a chest full. He didn't want to go out with his team members in uniform because his only ribbon above his 2 expert badges was his NDS. One day he confessed to one of his close Marine buds why he didn't like to go out with his team members on base. Railbak's bud said he remembers feeling the same way until the team leader appeared in full dress with his ribbons stripped and only his NDS ribbon on his chest and he told the entire team the proudest ribbon he wore was the NDS.

Why?

Well, history indicates the National Defense Service ribbon is one of the few ribbons shared by all members of the United States Armed Forces during qualifying periods of national emergency. Essentially, everyone awarded the NDS is in harms way the minute they pin it on their chest regardless where they are or what their MOS is...

MOS?

Military Occupational Specialty. It's a 3 digit number transcribed from a long list of descriptive military jobs including combat. And many of Railbak's team members have earned multiple MOS's. To Railbak and his team members everyone on a mission was a hero...including all the non-combatant support personnel who trained, supplied, transported, cared for and buried combat personnel.

I was told Railbak was a military philosopher.

Railbak is a rare bird; a real-life philosopher with the experiential foundation to support his philosophical intellect. The NDS was created by President Eisenhower in 1953, recognizing all US military personnel serving during periods of national emergency or other periods designated by the Secretary of Defense; including the Korean War; Vietnam War; Persian Gulf War; Global War on Terrorism. So, ever since then Railbak sometimes would strip all his ribbons from his chest and wear only his NDS ribbon to show his membership in a team including all US military personnel fighting terrorism domestically and abroad. Railbak came to believe all who wear the NDS are heroes who have knowingly have accepted the danger of being in harm's way whenever and wherever they may serve whether on active duty or remaining vigilant as a military veteran. Railbak teams have proudly sported the NDS ribbon somewhere on or near their bodies ever since Railbak's promotion to the USMC clandestine mission world and beyond, to show the world they are fighting against something bigger than their own personal conflicts.

Osita and I will be proud to display our inclusion in the National Defensive Service of the USA.

I will make sure you both receive your NDS ribbons and you can wear them proudly. Have you met Oblonsky?

No, but we know of Sky's reputation from Railbak and other members of Railbak's team who were on the ill-fated African mission with Railbak and Sky.

Either Railbak or I will interface with Sky, you won't have to worry about Sky interfering with your work. If he asks you about the NDS ribbon since you are clearly not active or retired US military vets, just tell him they were gifts for your service on so many US clandestine missions.

Don't worry about Osita interacting with Sky; he doesn't generally talk to anyone at all, let alone, as you say: up-close-and-personal. If Sky drops by Osita's cube for small talk or to probe into Osita's work; Osita will just keep working away with his head phones on without responding until Sky figures Osita is either a deaf mute or can't hear him or doesn't speak English and Sky will simply leave the area. I've

seen Osita utilize this technique on many occasions and it's very effective. I swear I see him smile everytime he gets to employ it...

Ohmydearlord, maybe I can hire Osita full time; and all his relatives. You two have got the ball Bititi.

Got which ball, Sned?

Sorry, just an old American-ball-game saying...means you are in control. I've got to get back to work. Let me know when you see something you want me or Sarafina to have a look at. Feel free to deal with Railbak too if you want to go around me. I've been told I have no ego. And I'm lazy whenever I can be.

I can see why Railbak told me you are wicked smart.

Really; coming from Rilbak that's high praise but I think it's you and Osita who might be wicked smart. I'm glad I don't have to work for you two, you'd probably fire me.

You are either a good boss Mr Snedham, or very clever...or both. I will keep one of my eyes on you.

Now you are just playing with me.

Not true Mr Snedham, you should know we mercs have the reputation that we don't play with others well...at all.

Please, it's just Sned, Bititi, like it's just Railbak. In spite of the fact that I'm never in too much danger of getting rubbed-out by the opposition because I'm one of the higher-ups on a mission; it's still uncomfortable for me to be designated a Mister. In spite of that, I think this has the makings of a fun and extremely purposeful mission. If Bastillia really is interested in the Bakken for her particular brand of future-terror I'm almost starting to feel sorry for her and her terrorist team. Excuse me Bititi, my SAT phone calls.

MORT?

Sned, you got a sec?

Let 'er rip.

Have you ever run across any terrorists with connections to the conflict diamond trade in Africa; so-called blood diamonds; or on the receiving end here in New York for instance?

Not that I remember Mort. Not even in an oblique sense.

You know anything about the Diamond Exchange in New York?

Only that it's under constant scrutiny by any number of domestic and global agencies providing everything from security to investigative services. What have you got?

Unsure, but in an unrelated classified report we stumbled on hard copies of chatter in the dark net regarding irregular shipments of pirated conflict diamonds from the Congo that may have found their way to the Diamond Exchange in New York through a circuitous route as yet to be uncovered.

You are thinking possible financing for terrorists?

Possible; what better place to have financing available than directly from a legitimate business inside the country terrorists have targeted for their nest of activities? But it's early in the game yet.

Do me a favor Sned, if you run across any tenuous or even anecdotal evidence of connections between the illicit African diamond trade—specifically conflict diamonds—and drug cartels or potential terrorist activities on the domestic front, let me know. Let Sarafina in on it too but let's don't cast too wide a net just yet. I'll contact Bititi directly.

Have at it Sned. Out

BITITI, this is Mort. Here's a question for you to think about. Do you believe it's possible that there's a potential connection between the blood diamond trade and Bastillia terrorism financing? Birds of a feather, perhaps?

Que? Birds of a feather?

Um, people of like-minds tend to find each other and band together moving forward like a flock of birds for security or other reasons.

I understand and believe you are wise, Mr Mort.

It's just Mort like it's just Railbak. Perhaps in some areas, but I know Bastillia's terrorist history reveals she is satanically-smart and well-connected with the global terror tech world in ways we can only imagine and probably cannot imagine. And I don't think she flies with many birds of similar feathers which is why she is so diabolically independent. And I think since she's got an old-school operational terrorism control-freak-streak from her upbringing, so I'm not convinced drugs are the way to exploit her crew. But I do know there is a whole lot of money changing hands to support her particular brand of terror and valuable stones are a whole lot more efficient to control during transport and ultimate sale to willing buyers; involving in many instances a single, loyal, well-paid mule. I suspect many buyers may well be legitimate dealers who rarely deal in conflict diamonds. Consider the sheer numbers of questionable, dicey characters involved in the-production of a drug cartel's theater-of-the-absurd required to harvest, process, secure and transport products like cocaine and heroin to market en-masse in order to ensure a decent ROI considering potential losses from natural and unnatural sources of intervention.

I understand...and perhaps I will be able to think as imaginative and creatively as the cartels and terrorists do who move forward in their missions as unhindered by the force of law as we are hindered by it; and assist Railbak in this mission to at least identify the whereabouts of Bastillia and her crew.

Roger that Bititi. Remember one thing. This Bastillia-controlled crew has unimaginable money sources available to them; which is a major reason they

continue to be viable as economic and political forces to reckon with in the virtual and physical worlds. They can be very persuasive even to the law-abiding crowd and at the same time threatening. Be careful who you trust for intel including your prior mission contacts or Osita's; especially from areas of Africa where Bastillia is known to operate in. Call me if you need me. Mort out.

VIII

Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend

DIAMONDS FOR U, how can I help put the right diamond on your finger?

I'm looking for some information and was told there was a patriot at DFU who could provide me with intel.

Who'd you get this number from?

Mort.

You are?

Railback.

What can I do for you Gunner.

Do we know each other, Patriot?

I was a 90-Day-Blunder; working abaft and not below the plates and still being a proud honorary member of the Acey Deucey enlisted Club; while attached to a CAG allegedly on Blue Water Training Ops; but in reality plugged into a couple of your missions from boats operating emergency air cover intervention while strategically acting as a diversionary tactic to attract any of the Red boomers in the area to keep them from interfering with your fine boots-on-the-ground work with a number of Russian-supplied allies in Africa.

Much appreciated. Sounds like samie-same now.

Could be Gunner; of course minus the back-door-chopper bristling with battle armament and emblazoned with the big Red Star which you enjoyed covering your exit and the fast movers our CAG had on ready-5 in the event your rear cover was just a ruse; more interested in accidentally launching a few air-to-CAG door busters...but that being said we still better move fast. I don't stay on sales calls very long and change this cell number about every week.

Copy. I don't have any interest in your dealings with conflict diamond producers. I'm interested in a seller; a woman terrorist who...

Bastillia?

You know Bastillia?

By voice only...and I have no way of knowing if it's her real voice. But I've brokered a number of precious stones deals for her over the years and tracked her general whereabouts best I could for my ONI contacts. None bore fruit.

Recently?

Very...I hadn't heard from her for some years and then within the last few months she suddenly resurfaced; requesting the identity of active diamond buyers, with few scruples about origin...specifically limited to the exchange in New York.

How do you contact her?

I don't. She contacts me by voice only.

Any idea where she contacts you from?

None.

Any calls recorded?

100%. It's the only insurance policy I have if you get my drift.

Completely...so this call is recorded?

Roger that.

One favor.

Name it.

Zip the call to me and contact me when you hear from her again.

Done.

Just a heads-up Patriot. This is a matter of potential domestic terror so you can imagine how many US intel agencies are involved. I'll do what I can to shield you and your activities from prying eyes and ears and limit your involvement to the apprehension of Bastillia; but I cannot in all good conscience make any guarantees about your safety or liability from any of the cast of characters both for and against Bastillia; and the agencies involved which I suspect will only expand and may include Canadian commisioners. This mission has the capacity to go FUBAR at any time and we'll all be on our own. Give my best to the Director.

Director who?

Patriot, understand I've been at this too long not to know how it works.

Understood Gunner—mission sounds like a boatload of fun--pack light, freeze at night. Alpha Mike Foxtrot.

Semper Fi Patriot. Gunner out.

AC, DO YOU know who this is?

I do.

I need you to back up all incoming phone calls to me for the past 4 months on a thumb drive and deliver it to me in the usual fashion...copy?

You got it. Tomorrow soon enough?

Perfect. Beer's on me. Out.

NSA-HOW MAY I direct your call?

Directors office please.

Director's office.

Is the Director available?

Your name?

Patriot.

One moment please.

Patriot? Secure?

Roger that Mr. Director. Gunner Railbak is pretty quick on the uptake and is somehow tightening the intel noose on Bastillia faster than I could have ever anticipated. All my years trying to even get a glimpse of Bastillia and he's already on a trail that at first blush seems unlikely but yet has a ring of plausibility considering that everyone involved in Railbak's scenario has a potential stake in the game if they get a seat at the table as he intends and he keeps the deal.

Do tell.

I just talked to the Gunner a bit ago. In this no-limit game of ours he shuffled conflict diamond miners and perhaps other Africa interests together; with drug

runners from Mexico and dealt the potential Bakken-Bastillia-led domestic terror crew in as one of the potential players at the table of evil.

Natural hunter...Railbak's our guy. Make sure our mutual contacts give him intel assistance whenever possible. Bastillia is the #1 enemy at this point for domestic terror and Railbak's crew can operate where we can't; sitting at the table under the eyes-in-the-sky taking on all comers and perpetually raising the pots. We'll take care of the drug cartel and anyone else deserving our attention after we make sure Bastillia and her backers are busted out of the game.

Roger that.

Oblonsky?

Keep him waiting in the wings for a seat at the big table and make sure he doesn't have enough assets to get in the game until Bastillia is out. We'll have enough trouble keeping this mission from going FUBAR without him betting-up the pot without the backing to stay in the game. We have no solid terror-intel contacts in the Bakken or Canadian shale oil arena yet; let alone the murky conflict diamond world. Railbak will have to produce them for us before we take an active role.

Understood. Patriot out.

SO OSITA, answer me this.

Yes, Bititi.

Put on your African hat.

Pardon?

Sorry, considering your extensive knowledge of illegal trafficking in African assets, have you ever heard of Ivory poachers trading intel with conflict diamond merchants on any topic? For instance potential markets; transport availability; security; or working in concert to transport their products between countries in Africa and ultimately export to markets abroad?

I can tell you, Bititi, of many rumors about the most bizarre alliances formed to further advance the economics of both conflict, or so-called blood diamonds, and ivory markets but I have not had direct, personal experience with any evidence; either human or otherwise, regarding specific groups involved or to any extent such partnerships have actually been formed and operating. Unfortunately for this mission; my history of terror-related work is ironically generally financed from more traditional sources such as oil which is traded in the light of day in the teeming global energy markets. The trick in the majority of my missions is to follow the money to figure out who is really doing the trading for the benefit of global-size terror organizations. The Ivory trade is especially shadowy because the raw product itself is illegal to obtain so the poachers are the primary source of data about the ivory both before and after harvest; and poachers are ghosts in the supply chain. Global markets for ivory are also extremely narrow compared to oil and in fact the only known, stable ivory markets are retail, after all the heavy-lifting and carving is finished. Blood diamonds share many of the shadowy aspects as ivory in my limited experience; except that conflict diamonds although mined under less than desirous conditions; are not extracted from a living, breathing thing in their raw form and they are easily transported and at times are purchased by legitimate global gem dealers either knowingly or unknowingly.

Heavy-lifting?

Now it is I apologizing for using common Western jargon.

It's cleverly Western as heavy-lifting does seem to make sense when speaking about elephant carcasses and ivory tusks.

...Except it isn't meant literally.

I thought as much...double entendre.

However, equally shadowy brokers control the transport and delivery of the finished, retail ivory art products which are created by only a few human factories in the world of any size; and these artistsans' sweat-shops basically have no knowledge where the product originates from or who pays them for

transformation of the raw ivory to finished products. And the smaller carvers aren't worth the effort to track as they can work on a small piece of raw ivory for months before getting back in the ivory market for stock that has probably changed hands many times. Why do you ask?

I have a theory driven by the experiences of a distant colleague, working under cover for an African agency, who became well-connected in the transportation of illegal art generally violating various African IP conventions; before it was illegally certified and integrated into cultural African art forms approved for sale on the open market. Once integrated the illegal art simply disappears in the retail marketplaces of the world. Some time ago in passing she mentioned another brief clandestine project she was involved in for an alleged African missionary who was represented to her as assisting tribal elders to relocate elephants who endangered the tribe's agricultural crops; before someone in the tribe called in the poachers to kill the elephants for them free of charge in return for the ivory.

What happened?

She discovered the project was a sham. The poachers' financiers were the money behind the project which was actually designed to specifically locate the elephants as targets for their hunters. She disavowed her involvement and beat feet.

You think it's worth digging into further with your contact?

If you come across any apparent connections between ivory poachers and conflict diamond miners let me know. If my colleague wasn't extinguished in the dust of her retreat from the elephant-poaching project; I will attempt to contact her and get you an intel update.

Sounds good Bititi. Every angle helps as I know the Boss will be way ahead of us and I'd like to stay on board other than to view video.

Copy that.

ANGEL? IT'S Bititi, do you remember me?

Of course Bititi. How could I forget.

Do you have a few minutes to visit and answer a few questions?

My pleasure.

Do you know any contacts within the blood-diamond dark market or the illicit ivory trade either personally or on the dark net who would be willing to answer a few questions on condition of anonymity?

Depends.

On what?

What's in it for them. Bititi, you know practitioners of such brutal economics are missing scruple genes so it is all about them. It's literally how they make a living and there is a lucrative economic attached to the communication of illicit information whether transferred via verbal or screen.

Understood.

Based on the value of the data I have the power of the US dollar.

Sounds like you're on another mission for the Yankees.

Something like that.

Let me initiate some contacts Bititi. This information is as well hidden as the location of blood diamonds or ivory poachers next targets so you can imagine the unsavory types you'll be dealing with. You are on your own as to assigning levels of credibility to the data you uncover. It might be that you will deal with me as my contacts trust me such that any of us are trustworthy and they will allow me to transfer data to you without revealing their identities. But it doesn't mean the data will always be free if they make demands on me to pay.

Acceptable. I should tell you Osita is involved in this mission as well.

My advice is let's don't play that card unless we have to, Osita has run up against a number of bad actors and been responsible for putting many of them away. Osita's involvement may scare my sources away.

Understood Angel. Nice to know Osita has that kind of reputation among the unwashed. Use this SAT phone as secure for data transference. Nothing written at this point. We're not anticipating presenting anything in a courtroom.

No survivors, eh?

Maybe no witnesses.

I copy. Remember to tell your handlers don't kill the messenger. Angel out.

OSITA?

Yes Bititi.

I just finished a convo on my SAT phone with a contact I know as Angel who is going to do some of her own, as you say, digging into the blood-diamond or illicit ivory trade. I told Angel you were involved in this mission as part of my effort to make sure she trusted me. So you may feel some heat from unknown sources although Angel claimed she will not reveal to her contacts that you are involved. She claims you have a real bad-ass reputation for putting away bad-asses so she doesn't want to use your name in her inquiries or she may get a lot of dropped calls.

Ha-excellent news from the war-front on evil.

Well, don't pat yourself on the back yet we'll be on a pay-for-say basis with her contacts and you and I will have to assign credibility levels. So, it'll be on our heads to get it right or the money flow will definitely be shut down. Let's face it we both know money brings out the vermin; we'll know early on if Angel is using real contacts for data or just making it up as she goes and sending the money to Switzerland. Above-all be vigilant; I don't want to lose you this early in the game.

Let me know even if you even get something as minor as hang-up calls. I'm sure we can request added security if we need it.

Thanks for the heads-up Bititi. I'm pretty sure out here in North Dakota I'm a long way from harm unless the coffee is worse than I think and my observations are the people in the office are drinking it and nobody has toppled over yet.

Osita, the reason you are so good at what you do, whatever that is, is you assimilate instantly into your surroundings. If you didn't look quite so semetic/nomadic/black you'd be wallpaper everywhere you work except North Dakota. So I'm going to trust you to work as you always have and never venture outside unless you've got one of the Trio or Railbak with you. I can watch over you inside the office.

Cracker Jacks, Bititi, that's the nicest thing you've ever said to me.

That's who I am...the nicest person on earth; who, as our Western friends put it; is also armed to the teeth.

GUNNER?

Bititi, how goes it.

Just a quick heads-up. I'm in contact from a distant with a sometime colleague of mine who calls herself Angel. She's connected in a number of nefarious trades including blood-diamonds and African ivory. I've asked her to do some investigative work about any connectivity between the two economics and perhaps some contacts to question either over SAT phone or on the dark net. Angel asked about money for info and I naturally said of course; so she will try and find a credible contact and the data offered may cost us. I'm telling you so you can tell me if payment for information is possible.

Not a problem Bititi. Mort has those contacts which of course must pass muster at the highest level but getting money for valuable intel is historically a pipeline we've used to obtain credible data to shine light on shadow economics. We

understand the GR8 is significantly lacking in the characteristics of the gene pool we deal with at times on these missions.

All I need to know. Osita has been informed but that's as far as the knowledge about this part of the mission goes at this point. He's known in certain parts of Africa and not in a good way to the evil ones; so I'd like to keep him out of this search for now.

Roger that. Cracker Jacks...Bititi the protector?...this is a side of you that I had not anticipated.

Just trying to preserve our assets for the mission; and work them as efficiently as possible for as long as possible Gunner.

Good work Bititi. Let me know if we need to infiltrate a contact of our own into the mix on the ground either in the Bakken or Africa. I've got just the character or characters to do it. Gunner out.

MORT? RAILBAK here.

Gunner, to what do I owe this call? You're coming precariously close to using up your max number of calls per day.

Cracker Jacks; I'll take that as a positive. We're moving forward faster than I originally projected; toward obtaining potential reliable data re: connections between the shadow economics of blood diamonds and the African ivory trade. We may need some incentive Yankee dollars if the data proves valuable.

You are covered but thanks for the heads-up. I presume it won't be as slush-fund draining as the new sports car in Zero-Dark-Thirty in payment for a phone number.

Cracker Jacks Mort, I always wondered if that was based on fact.

It was based on Hollywood's dramatic interpretation of fact.

Really?

How would I know? But I'll prep the Committee that money transfer for data may be a possibility sooner than expected. You are the filter everyone trusts. If you say pay...they'll pay; as long as it isn't an amount exceeding the GNP of California. Who are the potential recipients of our largess?

Bititi's potential contacts at the outset and later, perhaps Osita's at some point; inside either blood diamond and/or ivory trade economics. And ultimately my global contacts of a select few super spies.

Oh, geez Gunner? Who...not members of the fearsome foursome crew?

None other: Simplistisk, Pleasonton, Jameson or MG.

In addition to the Trio? The perfect likenesses for the Post Office wall of the most-wanted characters found primarily in some terrorist-supportive countries.

Seriously Mort, I've been on dozens of global missions and this one has the early indicators that we will need special help from operators who don't spend a lot of time reading the case law promulgated by the World Court in the Hague. If Bastillia is going to make a new, in-force domestic terror-move into the Americas; which early indicators suggest a group is poking around; it's the US and Canada being targeted. BTW, I don't want to completely send you to the doc to jack-up your nitro pill prescription but I may have to bring Cleats in as our insurance policy to ensure the data is clean.

Cracker Jacks, Gunner, the character with the potential to break the proverbial Committee's bank. I may choose not to disclose Cleats involvement to the Committee just yet.

For your ears only. Thanks for taking the lead with the Committee.

I thought we were going to have less acidic attacks when you left the Crotch and started your own civilian enterprise, Gunner?

Let's remember, I didn't go out looking for this Mort; your buddy Oblonsky and the NSA pulled me in.

Please don't mention me socially in the same breath with Sky. I'll formulate an approach for the Committee. In the meantime keep me apprised of details so I'm prepped in case a Committee member or two have their own radar on and see something suspicious they ask me about; so I don't get blindsided.

Roger that Mort, let's go get some bad guys so we can stay in business. Railbak out.

GUNNER RAILBAK; what a wonderful surprise. Don't tell me you need my humble assistance from Down Under? Considerable static on my end, is anyone else on the call? Which I assume all precautions have been taken to ensure the line is SAT secure.

Roger that MG. Thanks for taking my call. I'm at a strategy-point in an anti-terrorist domestic mission planning stage where I wanted to let several of you know about and determine if any of you are available, I want to include you and your skill sets into the op. MG, you are probably best known by anyone because your reputation has been public and successful for how shall we say: a number of years?

You flatter me Gunner. Probably a number of decades...

And you'd never know it; seeing you at one of your Aussie footy games.

Ha. Ever the gentleman.

I have Simplistsk from Russia; Pleasonton from Britain; Jameson, our Canadian counterpart and yourself on the line. Nobody other than the five of us knows about this specific conversation. Although clearly within my own team others will know about your assistance if you decide to participate. I ask that you bear with me for a quick back-story on what brings us together and the potential future mission. I trust you and have worked with all of you directly or personnel in your organizations over my years in global dark ops and clearly trust your loyalty to

your countries and the mission, whatever it may be. Many of you are familiar with The Trio, who will also be active on this op if it moves forward.

Simply stated our mission target is: Bastillia the terrorist. Some of you may know of her reputation as a former spy. We believe she is actively back in the terrorist-for-hire business and has been retained to upset the energy economics of the US and either vicariously or directly; the energy production of our Canadian neighbor. That makes Jameson's inclusion obvious. Our intel sources believe any one or two or all of her crew's trade in illicit drugs, conflict diamonds and illegal elephant ivory represent the primary cash crops which finance Bastillia's terrorist efforts dedicated to her planned invasion of North America beginning with the oil-rich Bakken. Pleasonton's British passport and African connections make him a resource we need for the diamond and ivory connections. We need to rule out Russia's involvement early on and that brings in Simplistisk so we can operate without fear of stepping on the toes of our former cold war rival and having Russia's knee-jerk reaction to our involvement include offering assistance to Bastillia. We want to get into Russia's intel community early so they will see fit to allow S to operate within our organizations' framework of prevention. We have absolutely no objection to S reporting back to the Kremlin so our Russian intel comrades don't get nervous with the expense of our operation. MG-you own the Pacific side. You all will report directly to me and I will deal with the US interests which as you can imagine will most likely include every major intel agency in the US government. But the beauty of this op: it is private so beyond the prying eyes of interlopers out of our immediate control. I will be responsible for control of organizational intel and data with the assistance of the Trio. Specifically, we believe, the Bakken in North Dakota and to a lesser extent the shale oil operations in Canada, are Bastillia's primary objectives to blow to smithereens. Domestic oil production forms the basis for US and Canada's energy independence and once the price per barrel of crude increases to its market average we believe this Bastillia-driven terror strategy to upset the North American energy balance is a long term objective by Bastillia and her employers, all dire enemies of the US although we do not know for sure who specifically is financing her strategy. The purpose for this call is to give you the opportunity to opt in or out before we get

rolling. Nothing in digital or hard copy correspondence will ever be exchanged between us unless the situation is dire; only verbal communication via SAT secure lines. Any of you who have questions, contact me and I'll answer to the best of my ability. If you opt out, I request to hear from you within 48 hours so I can cover. I have no objection to have any of you speak to each other under the same contact framework as stated. You should have no question about the potential danger of this dark op with Bastillia involved; you will be in extreme harm's way; regardless if that aspect of our op which should come as no surprise to you-all. Me and The Trio's primary responsibility will keep Bastillia and her crew of associates off balance enough to at least even the playing field. Bastillia is a cold killer and everyone in her crew is a killer and they work for very bad groups who have no moral constraint about dispatching anyone adverse to the success of their terrorist mission. You will be paid by the US government in Yankee dollars for your work. That's it for me. Thank you for you time I hope to hear from all of you within 48 hours. Gunner out.

V?

S, HOLD ONE, please everyone give me the room; are you secure?

Da. Have we heard from Bastillia recently?

We have not had contact directly with Bastillia in many months. Perhaps even over one year. Why?

I was recently invited to participate in an anti-terrorist mission targeting primarily US and Canadian oil targets with Bastillia as the primary suspect.

A ploy by the American intel machine to determine if Russia is a player in such a terrorist plot?

Perhaps, but if we call their bluff and I participate it will be very difficult for the Americans to toss me out of the group. And we may discover valuable intel along the way.

Good. Stay with it and keep me informed as you see fit. I'll tell the powers who need to know within the Kremilin you are on an anti-terrorist mission of global import.

S out.

GUNNER, IT'S S.

Thanks for getting back to me so promptly S.

I'm in. I'll await your direction. S out.

MORT HERE.

It's Railbak. S is in.

I'll be damned. We'll keep a close eye on him. We'll make it a a sub-strategic-op-goal to learn more from this strange bedfellow about what's behind the Iron Door he virtually stands guard in front of; than he learns about our US intel capacities. BTW, Gunner, you may have heard we have a new Boss's Boss here in DC.

So the rumor is true after all. We're kind of slow to come around to investing energy into the political process. Our ops don't seem to synch up with timing of the political campaign shenanigans. We vote; and the voting booth is as private as our ops even between team members. I wasn't personally convinced he was just going to DC to open up a new hotel.

Probably a matter of priorities.

What's your compadres' take on it?

As you know the compilers, profilers and strategists we work with are critical observers and deep thinkers. They have often maintained the true purpose of presidential debates isn't about winning because debate winners rarely win nationwide elections. So, like you and your crew; they have bigger fish-to-fry in

their professional pursuits and they spend little energy handicapping political races and the participants.

So, humor me. What's the purpose of the next four years from a top down perspective?

Seeing into the souls of the countries' leaders. US has a history of generally choosing character asset holders over capital asset holders to lead our country every four years so we have reams of data from decades of studying Executive Branch higher-ups . When our potential leaders stand naked in front of millions of eyeballs worldwide; the experience has a way of duplicating the injection of truth serum.

In this scenario?

As true as it could get. Fallout was completely missed by most people but there was a palpable crescendo as November 8th got closer and it wasn't because of FBI investigations of Hillary's emails. That story was too old and doesn't resonate with rural folks who don't deal in email regularly. Internally a couple of our compilers ran some very interesting algorithms tying the commodities prices to agriculture prices like cattle and wheat. The results spread nationwide maintained if everyone who was down in the dumps because of commodities prices, not for lack of work, combined forces based on trade, Trump was a sure winner.

What an incredible formula for success. Well, I can tell you the price of beef on the hoof in Montana where we raise a lot of cattle is around \$1.30 live auction price and it costs about \$1.60 to raise a single beef to sell at auction. Wheat prices have been down for many years with few exceptions. Yet Montana has statewide unemployment below the national average revealing how much sway agriculture has with politicians.

The curious aspect of results of our anecdotal analysis was the purely accidental discovery as we computer-scanned many speeches by our new Boss and his strategists; for specific word references; and commodities were rarely and only vicariously mentioned in the overall trade references. Yet, if you look at the maps

of who voted our Boss into office, it was disconnected, independent, rural voters from a couple dozen states believing they had been disenfranchised from the capital asset side of the US economy in direct contradiction to the new Boss's speeches which were fraught with continuing references to a new Administration's goal to return large manufacturers jobs to the US. Many rural folks in the US like in Montana, depend on ag to make a living even if they are running a bar or a store or a church. Maybe in former large manufacturing border-states like Michigan and Ohio the manufacturing jobs goal was received loud and clear; but our new Boss stumbled on the agricultural rural heartland by accident in too many states to not mention it even in passing and probably didn't realize the critical votes he was amassing even after he won. He probably still hasn't found this combination of ag features yet to develop the kaleidoscope pattern upon which his victory is based; as his advisor group isn't exactly heavy on ag knowledge. And our new Boss had the former independent-turned-democratic candidate to partially thank for ultimate victory.

Do tell?

The key was having the rural ag folks flip Candidate Sanders 1% argument from "disrobe the 1%" to splitting a faction of the vote opposing our Boss by not consolidating with the more traditional Dems and as a result anointing a solid one perceter with the Executive power of the country. Hopefully the predictable increase in the markets will include the ag folks receiving a deserved piece of it in the form of increased commodities prices. The ag people couldn't vote for another traditional Dem as her collective intellectual machine was already set and didn't include visits to a number of ag states, so they inadvertently voted for the ultra, non-apologetic, self-styled selfish capitalistic win-at-all-costs candidate completely the opposite of ag folks and their lifestyles. Now the ag voters only have hope; as their economic ally; that the new Boss will get them involved in the economic game he obviously has done so successfully with for himself in the concrete and asphalt urban world. Just maybe the 1% candidate that ag folks helped to elect into the highest level office in the land will help them out since he's already had the experience of leading from a highest office anyway; in his own sky-scraper.

Clever...and heck of a theory, Mort.

It's how it happened Gunner. These ag producers don't care if the Big Board in NYC collapses, they are focused on the Chicago Commodities Exchange. If our new Boss is really smart and figures out how to trade foodstuffs abroad and evolves the US into the bread basket and meat and poultry provider to the world; he will ride a wave of popularity that will keep him in office for two terms; and being a semi-recovering germophobe; he'll be able to do it without having to tour a wheat or barley farm or worry about stepping in cow pies visiting cattle ranches in Montana.

Cracker Jacks, Mort, you should be a political consultant.

Not me, but these compilers and profilers who make me look so good by fighting the likes of Bastillia, behind the scenes would no doubt be able to work miracles for candidates on the stump, although I'm fairly certain they would have little interest in politics as a steady diet.

OK, miracle worker; your divining rod on involvement by the Executive Branch in particular with this mission?

As my folks in the intel world predict for most things unpredictable: buckle-up buttercup.

Cracker Jacks Mort. Hope you keep our mission on point. Any pool set-up yet as to when your new Boss changes the name from Camp David to Camp Donald?

Ha, not yet but with the minds getting more creative as it settles in we're under new leadership with facets not originally anticipated; so you can bet there will be many a new pool in the grid.

Buy me a couple squares when it comes up.

No worries there Gunner. And just so you know, I'm not going anywhere yet. My years of government intel experience notwithstanding; in spite of our new Boss's apparent disenchanting disdain for those of us with extended experience in government; actually make me bullet-proof in some fairly powerful circles. I've got

my necessary supporters in really high places whether my office is in a concrete basement or not.

Copy that. Watch your back.

Can do Gunner. Out.

MG, TO WHAT do I owe the pleasure of speaking with my most glamorous spy?

Mr. Prime Minister. I have perhaps the most curious, yet intense, request based on a private US group's belief the oil reserves in the Bakken, North Dakota, are the primary target of a very bad terrorist attack headed-up by the ghost Bastillia.

Spell it out.

I am requesting; based on this US-based group's needs, total independence; for my dedication of time and use of Australian resources; to participate in this potential anti-terrorist op for perhaps months; with the only person in any of the Australian agencies with direct knowledge of my whereabouts: you. No contact in writing; strictly ears on SAT phones only at all times.

Bastillia, haven't heard of her for years. Credible?

Very. The anti-terrorist group is in operation now actively gathering intel and marshalling a global team to strategize a response to this threat. If my US contact is successful, specific super spies from Russia, Britain, Canada and the USA will be involved in a top-down US-controlled private op under the direction of the well-known global operator Gunner Railbak, which will remain outside either Congressional or any US agency's oversight.

I know of Railbak's reputation. Talk to me about potential use of Australian assets?

No details at this time but I'll inform you of such requirements for your approval prior to committing.

Will Australia or you be in harm's way?

Most assuredly, especially once Bastillia discovers we are allied with the US.

MG, I'm proud Australia will get to do our part to assist in ridding the globe of an evil terrorist group like Bastillia's. I have ultimate confidence in your judgment and will be respectful to continue to observe your stated top-down confidential, oversight approach to this op; and wish you and the Gunner my personal best and the best from the Australian people and God speed.

Thank you Sir. MG out.

RAILBAK, MG here.

MG, what's the verdict?

Even though the terrorist's financial interests are focused on industries such as diamonds and ivory which are of little interest to Australia's economics; the Prime Minister has a high level of interest in participating in your op Gunner. Paraphrasing the words of the Prime Minister and communicating his appreciation for including us in your effort: Australia is very proud to participate in your anti-terrorist mission with our US ally, Gunner. The PM has agreed to keep the op strictly ears only and I'll deal directly with him.

Ha, please thank your PM for his cooperation. We are delighted to have you and Australia on board. You never know MG how crazy this mission may get; maybe we'll trip over some crooked opal miners in cahoots with the conflict diamond miners. That would be a coup for Australia. Ears only...excellent.

Who else is in?

S.

Wow, Russia's in a hurry.

You know S. He's clever and will try and work both ends against the middle. Who knows how he sold the concept to the Kremlin. But I like having S close to me instead of across the water moving Russian pieces in a one-man game of intel chess; played in the Russian shadows.

Been there, done that, with S on the other side and I think he is a wise choice to participate. I'll await your direction. Thanks for the invite Gunner. I'll look forward to repaying the favor and get an invite to you to attend one of my Down-Under-Melbourne-Cup bashes. MG out.

SCOTLAND YARD, how may I direct your call?

Gobal Terrorism Division, thanks.

GTD, Six.

Six, Pleasonton. Secure SAT.

Not-So old boy, how's tricks?

Requesting clearance to operate a bit outside the traditional reporting framework as part of a privately run US op opposing a suspected Bastillia-supported terrorist group attack on domestic US and Canadian soil.

Back-story?

Fracking. The sudden and prolonged successful fracking oil drilling operations in the Bakken Shale formation which technically spreads from its epicenter near Williston, North Dakota and the Williston Basin into Montana and South Dakota; and North into Canada in southern Saskatchewan, South of Regina; and Manitoba, basically West of Winnipeg. At its zenith since its most recent beginnings in 2006, oil produced in the Bakken propelled North Dakota to the #2 oil producing state in the US behind Texas. Producing wells exploded on the Norther tier plains horizon of the US west and increased oil production by over 150-fold with some oil analysts projecting producing wells could expand to 40,000 to 50,000 from the

present approximately 8,000 and by-pass Texas' oil production of approximately 2,000,000 barrels a day production. Billions of barrels at that pace could be produced during the foreseeable decades from the Bakken. Suffice it to say, that build-up apparently attracted a lot of attention in various global circles and not just in the traditional oil-patch. Regardless, since drilling in the Bakken and the surrounding oil patch has declined significantly; nearly as quickly as the price of crude per barrel has declined globally; Gunner Railbak believes...

Oh, the Gunner reappears on our radar; I'm delighted to hear the US has the class of the international dark ops at the helm.

Yes sir. The Gunner believes Bastillia is at present preparing an elite terrorist group to strike the Bakken and the Canadian shale-oil operations when the drillers begin gearing up drilling to restart full-time operations as the price of crude increases. Which most of the oil energy analyst's project crude prices will continue to increase as the major Saudi oil producer's scale down their own over-production, reducing global crude availability and oil reserves. And the good news for the Bakken is advancements in oil patch fracking; since its initial appearance as an inventive approach to drilling for crude; have reduced production costs and allowed the US to be basically oil-energy independent.

Financing? Who and how?

That's where we come in Six. Conflict diamonds, illegal ivory and illicit drugs are all under suspicion as financiers of Bastillia's terrorism in North America as opposed to wealthy terrorist financial supporters; many of whom are rumored to use their oil revenues as ready cash for terrorist training and operations. As a team we'll investigate the African conflict diamond and clandestine ivory trade with a plethora of our team contacts; especially in Africa; for potential financiers and hopefully nip them in the bush or at least follow the money trail. As recently as four years ago poachers invaded Cameroon's Bouba Ndjidah National Park armed with the most modern assault-style long rifles; reputed to be AK-47's; and RPG's and grenades and proceeded to kill hundreds of elephants in a military-style operation including military-style transport vehicles large enough to load out the

extensive ivory cache. It is the size and nature of ops such as these that lead the Gunner and his profilers to believe there are partnerships for terrorist advancement involved in illicit asset transfer such as ivory and diamonds; which are to date unproven but suspicious. So a number of global operators with deep African contacts on the dark net are working with the team. African ivory connections are rumored to include distant troubled countries like the Phillipines where ivory use includes rare religious icons carved in ivory employed regularly by religions during their ceremonies which are increasing in size and popularity with ample carved ivory icons to cover demand for present and future ivory icon growth requirements. Religious leaders from various countries known to promote the use of religious ivory-icons en masse for countless ceremonies who had known; and perhaps still have known; ties to the US for equally diverse religious interests in the physical as well as the spiritual world; includes the Phillipines. The level and strategy of elephant slaughters such as those witnessed in Cameroon suggests there is a military influence in the poacher's elephant-slaughter ops and a high level of financing involved which obviates the profit levels in the global ivory trade; which the Gunner aims to determine if terrorist groups are using illicit assets as the backbone for their own activities...drugs notwithstanding. Tens of thousands of elephants are reputed to be killed each year for their ivory alone. As recently as five years ago; the single year elephant kill total stood at approximately 25,000. At approximately the same time Kenyan officials burned 5.5 tons of attempted smuggled ivory captured by officials from various surrounding countries; which predictably represents a small percentage of the total ivory tonnage successfully smuggled into the global market. Why?...Economics. A single large tusk can bring \$6,000 on the shadow ivory-trade market; which in today's technology-fueled dark internet marketplace allows the ivory trade to operate as a dynamic economic proposition; more efficiently than ever; bringing sellers and buyers together; using the untraceable bitcoin as the virtual currency; with a few keyboard clicks and very little associated risks. Weapons of mass destruction for the elephant poaching elite include assault weapons, rpg's and explosives such as grenades, which are relatively cheap and easily acquired. The only collateral damage to the poacher is a field full of dead animals left in their wake. Worth the risk? Revenue from the sale of a single large tusk is sufficient to maintain an unskilled worker's lifestyle

needs for 10-years in certain developing countries known for activity in the ivory-trade.

Fascinating theory Not-so; enlighten me about who Railbak reports to in his hierarchy of US agencies?

Unknown at this point if he reports to anyone since the op is independent. I assume the usual alphabet of players will be circling at some point: CIA, NSA, DOJ, FBI domestically; and others; with the op's primary oversight centered in one high ranking agency person who has allowed Railbak to run with the ball while he insulates the Gunner from prying eyes. The Gunner states in typical Railbakian finality to be directing an independent op with US public oversight limited to a single agency level with potential specific intel participating partners from Russia, Britain, Canada, Australia and the US.

I'm inclined to be delighted to receive an invite to this party. To be involved in a multi-national group of this caliber; and I don't mean weaponry; in pursuit of the invisible Bastillia is indeed an honor which I will not take lightly. What humble part can I read for in this play already comprised of dream players?

Copy Six. Out. Watch my proverbial back, Six, when the PM and others from MI5 and MI6 come calling about this op; as it surely will reach the eyes and ears of UK global terrorist interests from the watcher's and conspiracy theorists' rumor mills through their dark internet contacts.

Done. I'll play my part as best I can. I was a pretty fair actor during my days at Oxford. I'm also still in fairly good stead with all the intel parties in power. God speed Not-So. Contact me when and if you need me and if you need to have my old mate Mort contact me in your stead I will respect the confidential nature of his contact.

Copy Six. Out.

GUNNER, PLEASANTON here. SAT Secure.

Go Not-So.

I'm delighted to accept your generous invitation...that is to say we're in. I've got my secure contact at Scotland Yard's Global Terrorism Division. He can work independently as many of our contacts do and my contact knows you or is familiar with your reputation in the global intel community. I thought it best to have a source at the home office in the event the worst happened to me.

As I suspected you would think of the future of the mission's success although I'm sure you'll come through this as you have so many other dicey global ops.

Well, as we both know, our adversaries don't necessarily abide by the Marquis of Queensberry Rules to settle conflicts.

Roger that. I'll be in touch. Tell Six I'm glad he's on board. Over.

Now it's my turn to say Cracker Jacks Gunner. You never cease to amaze me...you are always out in front. Not-So Out.

CANADIAN SECURITY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE please.

One moment.

CSIS.

Minister of Public Safety office please.

I'll connect you.

Public Safety.

Is the Minister in?

May I ask who's calling?

Jameson.

I was just thinking what a wonderfully quiet day this was shaping up to be and my assistant said a Mr. Jameson was holding and all my dreams of enjoying a two martini lunch were dashed.

Glad I could douse an otherwise boring day for you Minister.

I like boring Jameson.

Are you secure?

Yes. Let's have it. You know I like the bad news first but since all you ever have is bad news, give it to me all at once.

Gunner Railbak is securing some assistance from the global intel community including specific partners from Canada, UK, Australia and Russia to help bring down a potential terrorist crew headed up by the infamous ghost Bastillia.

What kind of hard facts does the Gunner have?

The Gunner actually saw her in the Bakken where he believes she is forming a domestic terrorist group to undo the rich fracking oil fields in North Dakota and most likely our own Shale Oil operations.

Good Lord, if Bastillia is back in the grid, I think Canada would consider it an honor to the world to assist in her undoing. You want me to run interference?

That would be perfect if you would Minister as you know I detest the public aspect of politics when they get needlessly intertwined with my clandestine projects. The Gunner is handling the US agencies which may or may not contact you at some point. I trust the Gunner to give you a heads-up if he is taking heat and any assistance he needs from you.

I'm contact person for the Security Intelligence Review Committee and have intermittent meetings with most of the Federal Court members. I believe they will be comfortable letting you run a bit unfettered...especially since you will anyway with or without our input.

Ha, oh ye of little faith.

Let's call it history redux Jameson.

As the Gunner would say, Minister; Cracker Jacks, my reputation has apparently preceded me. This op most assuredly will get dicey if Bastillia is actively involved. Our national concern is the Gunner has a theory diamonds may have risen to the level of desired payment of choice between suppliers of terrorist supplies including military-grade weaponry.

Nunavut in Ontario somehow involved?

Perhaps as a naïve launderer of conflict diamonds tied initially into the African ivory trade.

Damn, Jameson, that ups the ante a bit between the US and Canada. We've heard a billionaire corporation from the Gunner's home state of Montana is making a play for one of the Canadian diamond mines. That somehow doesn't seem like a coincidence considering the Gunner's present project. Thought I'd better be totally transparent so you don't get any second thoughts in the event we discover connections between the Montanans involved and diamond miners in Canada.

You politicians always concerned about transparency. Actually, I find the timing very intriguing in my line of work. If you have no objections, I'll let the Gunner know I'm in. From here on out it could get untransparent on the reporting aspect of my operational end. I'll keep you apprised as best I can.

Deal...go safe out there Jameson. I know your skill set as well as anyone and so does the Gunner so I have to trust he knows who he is recruiting. Make sure you survive. I don't want to have to go find another Jameson. Over.

I appreciate the sentiment, Minister. I have no intention of taking an early, permanent, terminal retirement because of this mission. Out.

GUNNER?

Railbak here.

It's Jameson, I'm in. My Minister will watch my back with our internal folks in Public Safety and CSIS. Over.

Full House. Welcome aboard Jameson. I'll be in touch as soon as possible as with your specific involvement strategy within the mission strategy. This op is now fully operational and funded. We're ready to get some boots on the ground, in the air and hopefully walking on water. Out.

SNED.

Railbak. We're on with a boatload of a number of the cleverest, most experienced and dangerous spies and support folks on earth. And they're the ones on our side.

Heaven help us Gunner. I've often said in this intel business; be careful what you wish for.

Right on Sned. Between you and me, managing this crazy group of diverse interests will test my humble skill set beyond the tests created by my own shadow teams and we had waaaaaay more dangerous weaponry with unlimited ammo on my USMC missions.

The good news is we'll all be on the same side...won't we Gunner?

Let's just say there's a reason we have at least one member who may or may not have associations with competing global interests. And we'll be watching him like the proverbial hawk.

And he'll know it.

That he will.

I like it Gunner. We should get more out of this in terms of pure raw intel than he will.

I'll be leaning on you and Sarafina to keep me apprised of any current global chatter; especially on the dark net; you think might be generated by individuals or

groups even remotely interested in our op. I think I'll have my hands and brain full simply managing this crazy chaos crew.

Don't forget the Trio.

Cracker Jacks, Sned, that's the group I'm scared of the most.

Ha. Roger that.

Sned, I want you to try and locate another nefarious terrorist I haven't heard from in some time which makes me nervous: Phillip Saint Jean du Moresquette. If you are lucky enough to locate MM tell him I need a couple of moments of his time for a SAT phone chat.

Mayhem Moresquette...he's a good bad-guy to know his whereabouts. Let me start the subtle search. I have reached out to him a number of times over the years. I'll be in touch with you as soon as I hear from him; you can take that to the bank.

Use Donny if you need to. Donny doesn't move from his chair much but he's got a slew of very-shady, connected-characters on the ground; with dubious pasts; and he won't hesitate to use them for intel gathering esp if he knows we don't press him about his sources and he gets paid for good intel; which Mort will take care of. There will be a lot of moving parts to track on this op and it will get FUBAR before it's over, so let me know what you know as soon as you know even if you don't know if your data is 100% in the know...remember the 70% solution...it saved many of my ops from total debacle.

I read you Gunner.

Thanks Sned. Railbak Out.

SARAFINA?

Hi there lover.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina we're on an op. Can't you be more professional?

You forget I'm sleeping with the Boss of this outfit.

Can Sned hear you?

Of course. He loves the mental picture of the great Railbak sweating bullets when he's not even under fire. RB, my desk and Sned's desks are probably 2 feet away from each other and we practically have a party line when we're conversing. SAT phone security only works for everyone other than the two of us in this so-called secure office environment. This is North Dakota RB, not Langley.

Cracker Jacks. So you just heard Sned talking to me.

Of course. Sned and I are like spouses living in a one-room cabin. We have no secrets when it comes to intel.

None?

None.

Terrific. I better stop calling you.

Calling? I learn more about your ops listening to you talk in your sleep than I ever did during pillow talk. You can't stop. You are hopelessly in love with me and your missions and maybe not necessarily in that order. After Marine Corps boot camp you have had 1 date. It just lasted a whole bunch of years and you are blessed it's been with me.

OK, stop. Sned will wonder if we're working.

No he won't.

Why not?

Cause he's laughing.

Cracker Jacks. Railbak Out.

GEEZ SARAFINA, you don't have to torture the Gunner for my amusement although it sure makes my day.

I figure this op is going to get real intense real quickly; knowing how RB works; so I better get my entertainment in early.

He is so in love with you.

I know, Sned, I'm lucky and unlucky. Every time I hang up the phone I wonder if it's the last time I'll ever talk to him.

Don't worry about Railbak. He's bullet proof. I often thought I'd get smoked by a car in a crosswalk in downtown DC before guys like Railbak living the danger of day-to-day training and global shadow ops got accidentally scratched from the active list of an ongoing op by something as arbitrary as a stray bullet. Some guys like Railbak go through their dangerous lives calling for medics for other combatants on mission ops instead of getting fixed-up by them.

I hope your visual holds up Sned. I've got a real bad feeling about this op. Too many players potentially running out of our control.

Accept an observation from a true control freak, Sarafina, good news is; Railbak is in charge of this op; not Sky.

Ha. Roger that Sned. I'm always glad you're here and when it does get out of control I hope I hold up ok.

Sarafina, if your historical, successful ops track record is any indicator you'll be comforting me before this is over.

Riiiiiiight Sned. You are such a pinhead.

I know: but as one of my mentors used to say; I'm a boatload of fun. I better try and raise Donny to help me locate MM.

DONNY, SNED HERE, from the NSA.

Sned, my man, how's it hanging? You still partnered up with the most gorgeous spy on God's green earth?

Absolutely.

I have no idea how you concentrate on business instead of the luscious Sarafina.

The thought of Railbak killing me slowly if I don't.

Point taken. What can I do for the all powerful NSA?

I'm contacting you as a member of the Gunner's latest mission, being run as an independent civilian op, interfaced with perhaps a number of acronym-heavy agencies and well-positioned global spies with their own active, clandestine, global networks too scary to even think about let alone mention in my out -oud voice.

Sounds like the usual Railbak shit-show. Meaning specifically the usual reporting protocol goes out the window from the jump; but as long as I still get paid and don't have to go out in the field; I'm your guy.

The Gunner said you'd make sure about the pay and yes he'll take care of you through an agreement with Mort.

I'm loving Mort on the purse strings.

You may get some interesting requests from equally interesting partners in our loosely configured alliance.

Enlighten me.

Simplistisk, Pleasonton, Jameson, and MG are all supposed to be on our side.

Strange quartet; especially considering everyone has a different instrument...

...and sheet music. The strangest ensemble ever created I'm sure especially when the Trio joins in. At least the director is sane so hopefully he can keep all the players on the beat. Use your judgment granting them access to your intel databases and temporary asylum from dealing directly with your contacts

operating in the shadows. We don't want anyone not showing up for the next concert. And then give me a heads-up who wants what and when.

Do they know the lineup?

They do.

Oblonsky?

He's the Gunner's problem.

Roger that. This has the ingredients to be a fun looking concoction...can't wait to see it when the heat is turned up.

You always had a different sense of humor Donny.

What else?

Keep eyes out for any hint of involvement from one of the most irritating burrs under our collective saddles: Phillip Saint Jean du Moresquette.

Mayhem Moresquette? Now we've hit the straight flush of evil characters. The only instrument he plays has a clip attached to it...and I don't mean paper.

Let me know if your Mayhem alarm sounds-off; no matter how tangential. Give me a 20 if you locate him and if you should be unlucky enough to speak to him let MM know the Gunner just wants a few moments of his time for a chat.

Chat huh? Can do.

Also, have Cleats give me a shout when you run across him next.

No prob Sned. Thanks for the opportunity. Donny out.

SPUDS...DONNY HERE. Call me when you get a...

...Donny, don't hang up. I'm here.

Spuds, need a favor and of course you'll see it in your paycheck.

Riiiiight.

As long as I've got beer money, enough shells for my sawed-off and gas for my hog I'm good. I'm a simple guy. What's up?

You seen that n'er-do-well Cleats bud of yours around anywhere?

Maybe...who wants to know?

Gunner/Sned/Mort...usual suspects.

Sounds like the heavyweight class.

Gunner's got an op in the Bakken and may need some persuasive help obtaining intel.

Gunner shows good intuition. Cleats is as persuasive as anyone I know.

Put the word out for Cleats to contact Gunner per my suggestion. If Cleats wants to confirm with me that's cool.

Roger that. I'm on it. Does the Gunner need any extra muscle?

Before this mission is done he may need half the Bakken.

That's what I'm talking about. Out.

ASPHALT?

Spuds?

Roger. Hey, if you see Cleats let him know Railbak wants to hear from him.

Done. What's the play?

Unsure; but grapevine makes it sound like the op Railbak's calling about could be big.

No need to play the game if the stakes aren't big. Go big or go home. Big ops are right-up all our combined alleys. Out.

IX

Speaking of Alleys and Other Dark, Sinister Places Where the Rats Scurry About...

Agarrar tus Belos

SNED, THERE's suddenly a traffic jam of on-line data flow on the dark net; from too many disturbing platforms we monitor; for the increase to be coincidental.

I noticed. But worry not, Sarafina, I think the word is leeching out in certain circles about the Gunner's op.

I smell Donny and his band of dubious law-enforcers...and I use the term law-enforcers very loosely.

You mean the word masquerading doesn't come to mind; his law-less-enforcers are scary looking guys with who are usually badder than their prey; flashing official-looking bail-jumper-locator-bounty-hunter badges some time after they bust down a door or shoot a suspect with bean bags. No question. If I know the Gunner, he's got a method to his madness. Probably no better approach to kicking off the op than turning Donny's crew loose in the Bakken scouring the shadowy North Dakota underbrush like drummers on a hunt forcing the prey in front of

them, toward a meadow in the open; in the light. Here we go. I guess it had to start at some point. I just wish the Gunner could line everyone up in a starting gate like a horse race and fire a gun to begin. It's the pedagogy of the Gunner's philosophical education applied to missions. Hang onto a strap cause this underground train is plowing through a neighborhood near you.

I wish I could turn a phrase like you Sned. Sounds like so much fun and yet I know from experience how ugly it will get before its over.

Take heart, Sarafina, nobody better to be at the controls of this train whether on or off the tracks than Railbak.

But RB drives too fast.

All that much better to stay out in front of everyone involved or not involved...especially drones and the prying eyes of brown-nosers and internal NSA CI's loyal to Sky.

Interesting visual perspective.

Look, Sarafina, at times it's better to be out in front of the guy who thinks he's operating the pace car because that guy is more fixated on looking in his rearview mirror to make sure nobody gets out of line and participate in the race as a defensive blocker to prevent anyone from getting out in front of him; even if they are smarter; he'll never see he's already behind and playing defense himself instead of leading the offense. Railbak was a pure offensive player as a football star and carried the concepts through to his operational leadership strategies.

Clever.

Railbak wrote the book on clever mission ops leadership. And you can be sure he's forming more alliances with more strange bedfellows in more diverse locales than you can imagine to pull this mission off successfully.

I hope so Sned.

You of all people know so, Sarafina.

MORT?

What can I do you for Gunner?

Can you retask some eyes-in-the-sky for me to intercept intel from the current gang wars in the state of Guerrero in southern Mexico and terrorist activities in Butug, Phillipines. I don't need an eye spying in either location for extended periods, just long enough time to obtain intel about which gangs or terrorist crews are active and if any illicit product is potentially being moved in large volume; including drugs, explosives, weapons, diamonds and gemstones, and ivory. The Guerrero area in Mexico being a gang/cartel locale in the south and a some-time battleground for control of drug trafficking; would seem to indicate product is being moved from outside Mexico through controlled access points perhaps to protected northern Mexican locales for continued movement into the US or Canada. The Phillipines is again on our radar because of the enhanced production of explosive devices; rumors fueled by the presence of the so-called Maute crew being mentioned in the chat-rooms in the dark internet. The chats obviously attracted the Phillipine government's attention as they instigated a military assault on an abandoned Islamic school in the southern Phillipines where the Maute crew supposedly has set-up shop. The Government's action was also prompted by the bomb-makers reputed loyalty to the Islamic State terrorist group.

I remember the Maute brothers Gunner. Weren't they blamed for the September attack that killed a bunch of people in Davao City...President Duterte's hometown? The brothers were allegedly affiliated with another terrorist ghost-like character called Sanusi, until he was liquidated a number of years ago and has been kept alive via legend although he, like Elvis, has definitely left the building.

Cracker Jacks Mort; you've still got that steel-trap memory of bad global characters. I'm looking for sudden bad-guy activity of any size, globally, which is why we have the world class super spies on the team. MG can handle anything on her side of the world in the Phillipines or Indonesia in particular. We have no idea what Bastillia's terrorist plan is, but there will be indicators she and her crew are

recruiting cartel and terrorist allies for a mission in the Bakken or in the oil shale operations of our friends to the North. Our first step is to narrow the playing field when possible so we can determine where 70% of her crew and economics are coming from. Then we'll fashion our offense and special teams to counter. We haven't even kicked off yet.

What about defense? Any towns in particular?

We've been playing reactionary defense too long. The team we've put together knows one approach: go long and run down hill. Ajuchitlan seems to be one of the targets for cartel-type violence in recent weeks in Guerrero state. Gang-style messages are being left behind on public venues where the ever-popular form of messaging is the recurring presence of dismembered bodies dressed in obvious gang membership colors or tattooed or branded and dumped by the side of heavily-used roadways for no apparent purpose. But the message is clearly meant to reverberate through certain drug cartel members. Kidnappings have also been reported in Ajuchitlan. We're not familiar with this area so it could be an awakening for smaller cartels with an incentive to get bigger; urged on by a crew with global reach or trying to achieve a global presence. Government authorities claim they are chasing a wounded gang leader and citizens are allegedly forming vigilante patrols. In the Philippines, let's get a look at Marawi City and Butig in the southern part of the country. The Maute group has been looking for funding and it makes sense they are trying to attract IS attention. But the Maute's economic efforts may have attracted another interested crew like Bastillia's, looking for experienced terror-type recruits but as an organization wanting to stay under the radar.

Sounds like just the chaotic shit-show from which economic opportunity is created and expanded by traditional drug cartels; if there is such a thing as traditional; flexing their territorial muscles. Que es lo que se.

That's why you get paid the big bucks Mort...let's have a look and find out what's what.

Ha. I'm on it.

Thanks Mort, I've got to take this call.

RAILBAK, IT'S SIX.

Well, this is a once in a lifetime phone call Six. In fact it's far more frightening that you called me than the reverse. I still owe you for the data you provided me after a certain North African op that went FUBAR some years ago.

You owe me nothing Gunner. It's always a pleasure to provide intel to someone who uses it effectively and immediately.

Well, the irony is the data you provided brought our friend Sky back to reality but as fate would have it here; I am again faced with his laissez-faire leadership incompetence up-close-and-personal. But truthfully I'd rather have him close enough to me to be in my cross hairs if need be; and I'll try and coach him up; instead of wondering if he was stalking me from beyond the pale.

Beyond the pale? Railbak your literary side is showing through again.

Cracker Jacks, thank heaven that slip-of-the-tongue was with you and not any one of my other former ops guys...I'd never hear the end of it...and James Joyce would turn over in his grave to have some jar-head like me make casual reference to the dimensional intellectualism cultivated in his classic, beautiful lilting works about his beloved Island.

Actually, not wanting to miss an opportunity, I still might lobby to win a pool or two. Wish I would have had my recorder engaged on this phonecon.

Cracker Jacks Six...you are in the Railbak pools too?

Scotland Yard may be my playground but even without proper football goals on campus; I never passed up a sporting wager I thought I could win. Especially having grown up on the mean streets of London where there were bookies who'd give odds on anything; anywhere. Vegas betting lines and their bookies and backers are pikers compared to London odds-makers.

Cracker Jacks.

Anyway, I'm going to relay an old story from our intel files strictly off-the-record which is why I'm on my SAT phone with you. This factually-based event traces its lineage to the late 1800's in South Africa. The reason it may be of interest is that it could offer you some insight about a connection worth investigating relative to the funding of terrorist events specifically instigated by Bastillia.

Fire away, Six, you've piqued my interest. I love an epic starting in the 1800's. I'll let you know if I have to recharge my SAT phone during your preso. And, the perfect person to pursue the evolution of any of this yarn would be our boy Pleasonton, I presume.

Roger that, Gunner, he's on board. During the late 1800's when South African diamond mining was heavily integrated into the London diamond marketplace, Cecil Rhodes, of Rhodes Scholar fame was making his name as a mover and shaker. Kimberley and DeBeers are probably familiar to you as historic diamond mines with the former containing multiple claim players large and small and Rhodes had his considerable reputation dug in as deep as the claims themselves. Alternately trying at different times to build-up certain claims and tear others down; depending upon his loyalty at the time. He was involved with some very interesting characters which included a fellow who reputedly fought in the Prussian Army.

You and I both know, Six, wealth and the promise of wealth attracts characters; most without character.

Well, that holds true for this period in time in the late 1800's in Kimberley. To simplify a complex global tale, diamonds lost about half their market value and when the dust cleared, the claim holders and investors included the quick and the dead; both financially and physically. Rhodes being one of the double-down survivors; which usually is the case even today in global financial dealings; the big operators got large and the small operators got-gone. As legend has it, this Prussian gentleman became involved in a romantic relationship with an exotic mine frequenter who was known for her specific brand of mining expertise at

various levels of the diamond claims without the awkwardness of a pick and shovel. She reputedly had Spanish and/or North African heritage and connections; probably a result of previous alliances between Spanish explorers and their subjects during Spain's efforts at conquering the world before Britain took its shot. This exotic business-woman's primary business was entertainment; she and her troupe were very well known, very savvy business-women and very well thought of for their abilities among the men in the camps. Needless-to-say you can have Pleasonton fill in the blanks as needed for the next century. But the same lineage of women seemed to span the mid 1900's and expanded into various phases of the Ivory trade with their new-found wealth from diamond interests. Diamonds and Ivory somehow linked with conflict or blood diamonds being the market subject, albeit not in the legit valuable stones market. By the time Scotland Yard and Interpol became sophisticated in surfing the Dark Internet or Dark Wed, whichever is your pleasure, the shadow market for valuable assets had evolved to a very sophisticated level. We know because a few decades ago we finally started intercepting conflict-diamonds stuffed in hollowed out ivory pieces. The intel that resulted in the busts was based on data scraped from the Dark Internet.

Cracker Jacks, Six, that is an incredible story with plenty of possible intrigue relating to our present mission.

It hasn't really been a major theme in our known terrorists strategy for finance until now. With Bastillia back in the game and the Bakken perhaps in play, our compilers; who deal with seemingly unrelated intel much like chaos mathematicians approach unusual, advanced algorithms; believe there are points of similarity like DNA between blood diamonds, and illicit ivory and terrorists bank accounts.

Cracker Jacks, Six, wish I had those guys on my op.

You do now Gunner. It's this op that prompted my folks to take a look at the seemingly unconnected connections between diamonds and ivory starting in the 1800's. Terrorists depend on the media to run with the obvious stories which

shield the back-stories buried deep in some hole like bin Laden's loyalists who believe he's still alive.

Don't forget Elvis.

Touche, Gunner. Anyway, we've learned to compress decades of knowledge into a few years; developing algorithms with an attached time line capable of predicting certain behaviors in both present-day and in the future. Which as an aside, MG will be able to put you in touch with one of the leading developers of this approach to predictably of bad things. Point being; if you need a look into the predictable future once we get up and rolling, let me know and I'll have some of my folks interact with the Down Under brainiacs to do the war-gaming. They love this stuff. These are the most intense kind of techies—purposeful in a global defense sense with a plethora of offensive formulas. They could care less about making a flying car unless it can carry sufficient stealth armament to arrive undetected at the target and enough ammo to reduce the target to a chasm the size of some of your national canyons.

Sounds like a lot of the GR8 flying around amongst your crew.

You don't want to spend too much time with them Gunner. Their hygiene and diets are atrocious.

Sounds like my teams in the field. My ops teams complain perpetually when they're in the field; but their spouses tell me frequently if the team is not back on a training op or actually in the field on a mission within a few months of being home; the spouses will send their team-member-spouses and all their gear to live with me. My teams' primary, overriding mission in life is apparently: the mission. You know what the wise Marine said: you don't have to love your work, you just have to love to work. Thanks Six. You gave me an added dimension I hadn't counted on which I think may offer us a bit of leverage to tilt the odds in our favor as we push forward.

My distinct pleasure Gunner. Let me relay one new wrinkle; before you go; that could be coincidental but showed up on our watch-list just this morning, from our

compilers. There's a privately held mining company headquartered in South Africa called Lysbine Gold Limite; which recently was announced as the purchaser of a Whitewater Mine in eastern Montana that mines palladium and platinum. The reason this transaction would show up in the results of our compilers algorithms suspect list is because of the Bakken's close proximity to the mine and the terror factors our folks plugged into the Bakken arena such as; eastern Montana's inclusion in the expanded Bakken area; and the fact that Lysbine's only commodity until recently was gold; Lysbine is privately held preventing much public oversight; and is purchasing the only North American producer of platinum and palladium from a mine near the Bakken which includes its own recycling smelter. Toss all those apparently unrelated concepts into our chaos-style algorithms and your Bakken terror op pops-up in the interested-parties results category.

Cracker Jacks.

Precisely. We'll keep tracking this transaction especially since the Lysbine executives are expected to show up at the Whitewater Mine as early as next week for the introductory meeting with the present employees. The deal is allegedly done and only needs the blessing of the mine stockholders in their vote; which we believe won't experience any speed-bumps since the announcement of the purchase resulted in Whitewater's stock to rise significantly.

Sounds to me, Six, like a good excuse to get our own techies to uncover the details of this transaction and attempt to place a mole in the Whitewater mine operation. I can think of a couple African candidates who might just fit the bill.

Roger that, Gunner.

You never cease to amaze, Six. Gunner out.

SNED? RAILBAK HERE.

What's up Gunner?

Can you get Sarafina and Osita in a secure location so I can speak to them in private on speaker?

Can do. Hang on it'll take me a sec. Sky is on the road somewhere pretending to work so we'll use his office which is secure and soundproof.

Perfect. I'll hold.

You want me in on it.

Up to you. Fine with me just as long as you don't need plausible deniability for any upcoming potential discussions with your Boss.

Heck, Gunner, that would characterize my approach to any potential discussion I ever have with Sky since he's more concerned about what's going on in the upper echelons in the NSA in DC than what happens in the Bakken. I never worry about plausible deniability since Sky's ego prevents him from imagining I could possibly know anything he doesn't already know and anyway Sky is more concerned about his own appearances with the higher-ups, than with the lower-downs like me.

Cracker Jacks Sned. Sounds like Sky hasn't changed a lick since he got drummed-out of the Corps, which his jacket officially characterizes his exit as voluntary. Why did I not intuitively suspect as much? Thanks for the insight.

OK, fire away Gunner, Sarafina and Osita are on the call.

Greetings.

Hi RB.

Boss.

Here's the deal. I won't bore you with the why today but the short term mission is we need to place Osita in the Whitewater mine operations in eastern Montana after a group of the new South African owners from Lysbine Gold Limited visit the Montana mine site next week. Timing is good as we want Osita to appear to be part of the inevitable stream of a transactional team of consultants visiting Whitewater to establish a dossier on the Whitewater operation before final

approval by shareholders next year. Sned and Sarafina, we'll need an entire bogus background work-up for Osita. You figure out how best to portray him, with perhaps more of a human resources mine-type executive expertise; reviewing FTE's and human asset overhead; as opposed to a mining engineer reviewing production and smelting costs. I'll figure out who to get in touch with so we have a friendly in the Whitewater operation at the Montana mine who will act as his consulting contact. Osita's African background fits the transaction nicely since on paper Lysbine has no experience outside gold mining until very recently. I'm confident at this point if there is anything between Lysbine; the new owner, and Bastillia; the relationship does not extend to an existing connection between any potential terrorists and Whitewater but you never know as all we ever see is veneer until we're inside. This transaction is being driven by Lysbine from the African half of the deal-makers. Which could mean as a private entity; Lysbine could be the beard; and will ultimately be purchased by a group less-interested in gold and more interested in terrorist activities with a clear channel to transport diamonds into the US to finance an op in the Bakken. Osita, it won't hurt you to bone-up on platinum and palladium mine personnel operating numbers and general HR data. Good news is you'll be one of the reigning experts as this is the only mine of its kind in North America. Copy?

Very interesting Boss.

We'll go into the history behind this aspect of our mission and where this most recent data comes to me from at a later date; but those of you who know me, understand I believe there are no coincidences in life. So, get out your calculators and do the math about the odds a South African Gold mine and a Montana Platinum mine even know about each other; let alone understand the lack of; or plethora of; the milieu of business philosophies between these two entities and any mutual interests. Include in your odds analysis why a privately-held gold mine with no skill-set in Whitewater's product traded as a commodity; approves the sale in principal with virtually no due diligence including a prior cursory visit to the mine site. Why these two businesses are not crashing into each other like in a head-on train-wreck; but somehow are assimilating nicely; at the very moments

when we are investigating whether a potential terror organization wants a piece of North Dakota and may finance their efforts in North America with conflict diamonds and illicit ivory from Africa; is a mystery to me. It doesn't take a genius to think something here screams foul-play which the mere spectre of makes this curious union worth investing our energy into...the sooner the better. Read me? Sned, Sarafina, Osita?

Crystal clear and we've got our marching orders Gunner

Thanks Sned. Railbak out.

WHAT DO YOU THINK, Sarafina? Time to wake-up one of our long-snoozing compadres to ensure we get Osita placed safely at Whitewater.

Oh geez, Sned, you don't mean Viacon the Vicious.

None other. Head-hunter extraordinaire.

Yeah, except in this instance we may not need to employ an assassin with a machete; but a more virtual-style head-hunter....an actor and techie nut to get inside the mining operation without leaving a blood trail to a corral full of hoarded valuable intel.

Maybe, but until we get Osita comfortable with playing one hand I'm inclined to at least run the role by VV to get his thoughts.

And we're off—I'll ask Donny to get a 20 on our own ghost-like consultant.

I'll get rolling on background and docs for you Osita. Any questions.

A myriad Sned. Starting with; who is Viacon the Vicious? Is he friend or foe? Any relation to Mayhem Moresquette?

Excellent questions Osita. Sarafina?

You better handle it Sned, you have such a perfect W-4 for the characters involved in these uber-complex Railbak-types and their; how do I say it: eccentricities.

W-4 what?

Wonderful Way With Words.

Cracker Jacks, where's the Gunner when I need him? I'm being managed by his brilliant lady yet again.

I love you Sned, you accept all the shit-work with such enviable humor and humility.

Riiiiiiight. Speaking of shit, Sky is going to shit-a-brick when he gets wind of the global reach of this op and he's on the outside trying to find a window to peek in.

So, make sure the shades are drawn and he'll only have a peep-hole to try and see in. Once in a while the good guys do win one. Well, speaking of a good guy, RB on my SAT phone. Later Sned.

I'M SORRY, YOU HAVE reached this recording because your incoming number has exceeded its daily quota of calls to this SAT phone.

Funny. How goes the battle Sarafina?

Sned and I just finished assigning our own strategic positions for the potential upcoming skirmish with Sky when he discovers his entire intel world is about to become involved in a major turf battle right under his nose. And his 2 primary intel officers are in control.

How'd the assignments play-out for you?

Great for me; which of course they don't hold a candle to the strategic positions you and I employ; but I have managed to retain no responsibility whatsoever with Sky.

Cracker Jacks, Sarafina, can't you focus on the op without continuing your clever double entendres?

If I do that I'd be screwed...

Or not I hope.

RB, that was funny; you realize you were just funny.

Cracker Jacks; it's just as I anticipated; you managed Sned into taking care of Sky's annoying clutter.

Sned volunteered.

Because Sned is really smart and guards against the useless expenditure of every strategizing with you because achieving any operational options other than what you want are futile.

Like I said, Sned volunteered to be on point with Sky internally.

Sned loves you, Sarafina.

I know RB. But he only knows work-family-careing. My job is to make sure Sned doesn't get trampled at work by someone like Sky and some day Sned will meet someone away from the job who thinks he's the dream guy.

Sned will have to actually go somewhere other than his office and apartment to meet somebody new.

It'll happen. I've made it my personal mission.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina. Just stay out of it, Sned's a grown man.

In some ways; but in the ways of love he is 30-something going on 15.

He needs a mom.

He's got me already; now he needs a careing, romantic lady friend.

I wonder if we could stop playing cupid and focus on the primary op for just a sec? I realize there are other ops of equal import to you but we are on somewhat of a timeline here and we've got a whole slew of moving parts I'm trying to channel to acquire the intel we are in dire need of to keep our offense moving toward the red zone.

Moving parts...I think that was supposed to be funny again. OK, sure Lover, no need to get stressed out. I'm never sure what or where the red zone is. At the risk of showing my naivete to your rather illuminating, sporting metaphors; are we still fully dressed when we get close to this red zone?

Cracker Jacks Sarafina; I'm not stressed-out except when I talk to you and I'm wondering if you realize the complex nature of this Bakken op.

Why don't you enlighten me Big Chief as I'm apparently not too quick on the uptake.

No need for sarcasm.

That wasn't sarcasm, that was serious. I'll just put the phone down and make sure it's on speaker and you can ramble on about everything you think I should know about our offensive maneuvering and I'll have both hands free to take notes since I've never been on a big-boy op before.

Ramble? OK, Sarafina, relax and I'll leave you and Sned to your assignments.

Are you sure you don't need to remind us of our assignments to keep running the bases to get closer to the red zone, again Big Chief?

Cracker Jacks, Sarafina, ok, look, I get it...Boss in name only. Railbak out.

HOW'D IT GO WITH Railbak, Sarafina?

Peachy Sned, just like I hoped, but thanks for asking.

Which means it went your way...well, here we go...again.

X**2 if by Sea...**

DONNY?

Gunner, I'm pretty sure you've used up your quota of SAT calls to me for the next few years.

Believe me...I wish. I'm sure it's hitting me in the pocket book too. And just so you know you're in good company as it's not the first time I've heard that today from one of our team members who is sure I have no sense of humor.

I can only imagine who; let's see...beautiful analyst; brilliant; ebullient; real babe.

Yeah, yeah, attracts worker bees like you to the honey comb queen.

Gunner, I want you to know it's strictly look but don't touch. I know for me I would be kicking waaaay beyond the coverage.

Cracker Jacks, Donny, don't ever let her hear you say that, she's got a big enough head already.

That's funny Gunner.

Twice in the same day; I should start a stand-up routine. So, if we can refocus on this seemingly insignificant op we're attempting to pursue; what's the chances you've seen or heard from your buddy Viacon in the recent past?

Not good; as I haven't been asked to locate an assassin or a general chaos-instigator for any of my clients in some time.

Is Viacon still in business or has he gone legit?

I'm sure he's still operating in his unique fashion and has plenty of paying clients, none of whom you would ever run across in a local coffee shop. His lavish lifestyle I can tell you exhausts even Viacon's substantial global assets like water through a fire-hose as he cruises around the globe with a couple of his inner-circle crew members to his secretive hot spots in Europe and Africa at-will whether on business or pleasure.

Good news for us. I need you to have him contact me at my secure number when you get his 20. Do you know if VV ever does business in the non-English speaking Americas?

I'll go out on a limb and say if the op money is liquid and paid in advance, in a launderable currency other than the great stone coin of the Yaak Islander; like bitcoin; and in an amount in direct proportion to the op risk as he assesses it, VV is interested. The op W's; who, what, when, where and why; are incidental to VV when compared to the how-much. VV leads a fairly fluid life himself; owning nothing in his known name which is traceable him; which fits his liquidity nicely. That being said I'm fairly certain there's no way we'll get an accurate 20 of his immediate whereabouts; but if he's in this world he'll contact you Gunner; and can be wherever you need him. But be aware; once you have retained VV; you've got him until he says his responsibilities are finished. Surely, VV is a renaissance man, Cracker Jacks, Donny; I've never heard VV described so articulately.

Heaven help us. And just real quick; since I don't share in VV's asset levels and I need paychecks; I just want to make sure I'm on the approved payroll for my efforts during this search-and-secure aspect of the op? Starting now?

Absolutely...Cracker Jacks, Donny; did anyone ever tell you that if this op wasn't funded with government funds; you would be described as a capitalist marvel?

I consider that a compliment Gunner. I've heard I'm a capitalist from a number of my privately funded clients; but usually the speaker follows capitalist with pig. Besides, if I don't worry about me getting paid, who will? Speaking of capital, I know I don't get paid if I'm not producing and in the words of one of my movie hero producers: John Wayne: I'm burning daylight. Thanks Gunner. Donny out.

CLEATS, DO YOU EVER ANSWER your phone? Hey, it's Donny, your favorite money launderer. I'm sure you are on some mission out there slaying the dragons. Give me a shout when you get a chance. I'm trying to locate double V for a potential op. And no, you can't get on that list. It's a one-man job with a real short list of one...and I'm just playing client locater for a fee. Thx.

GUNNER? MORT.

Bad news first Mort.

Ha, always Gunner...always. Hey, I'm looking at real-time sat images somewhere off the Northern California coastline of what appears to be a semi-submersible approaching a large container ship which has dropped anchor just out of the flow of water traffic in the North-bound water-highway between San Francisco and points North.

Semi-submersible originated from where?

Unsure as I just recently retasked the eye to give me a tilted Northern view as I did not locate any container ships which originated south of LA. But clearly the submersible originated its voyage from somewhere on the Northern California coastline. I'll run some reverse scenarios to discover its possible origins; knowing what we do about SS's; payload, fuel consumption, etc. We should come up with a

number of possibilities. What are you thinking...another wholesale drug staging area on land; prior to transport to mother ships?

Exactly. Makes sense these guys wouldn't put all their eggs in one big transport basket heading to Canada. The concept that there is another drug cartel involved in the same geography doesn't fit any scenarios we've seen so far. But it may be possible. If we can confirm intel and trace a previously unknown delivery route either from a previously unknown drug producer or simply a new Ho Chi Min-like Trail hiding in plain site from Northern California to Vancouver, reduces the risk of our team's discovery if we can flip low-level grunts from a previously undiscovered cartel using a previously unknown route to market.

Sounds like you're out in front Gunner. I'll have my team run some probabilities and shoot them to you in a bit.

Mean time, Mort, can you keep an eye on the SS cargo mother ship until it gets close to Vancouver. Just to make sure it doesn't offload in Seattle.

Roger that. But I don't need to tell you approximately a million people a year cross the Montana-Canadian border which; at 545 miles wide is twice as long as the Mexican-US border. Consider this: there are fewer than half as many border enforcement personnel working the ground on the Montana-Canada border than on our US Southern border. Add the super-skinny population centers on the North Dakota-Canadian border to the cartel's North American product delivery risk calculation and I doubt that any strategic cartel trying to hit a home run for drug sales in the frozen US North would choose to reduce their delivery odds into the US market by attempting to shoehorn a world-class load of drugs into a world-class port like Seattle. Especially considering Seattle is heavily patrolled on the water and on land 24/7/365 under the scrutiny of multiple, competing local, state and federal US drug-agencies.

Agreed; you're singing to the choir Mort; but as we in the intel world know, the drugs get through somewhere; somehow; and whether we use the intel or not for our op we can pass it on to agencies who will.

Right on Gunner. A new, choice, cheap drug supply from Mexico, delivered by a global Cartel attempting to invade the territory of the ever-present hometown drug suppliers from Washington State illicit drug manufacturers and growers with years of market-development effort of their own favored clientele in a multi-state area plus well-established distribution routes; would only result in a drug war with no winners for years. Why not circle around the speed-bumps presented by US ports of entry to get to the pot of gold into North Dakota? Look, we already know approximately 50% of the Exstasy in the US is illegally imported from Canada. Most likely because its southern border with the US is a virtual sieve giving Ex sellers unobstructed access to the rich US Ex markets; not because Canada is a cheap, prolific drug manufacturing country. The Mexican cartel supplying the hard-core meth and coke market in the northern US could always piggy-back their products on Ex shipments crossing the border with a few extra Yankee dollars changing hands. Or learn from their years of successes and failures throughout the globe; and realize, as always, the more illicit products the merrier and the fewer partners the higher the profit. Especially in the frozen US North where the winters are long and dark; the work outside is even harder; demand is high; (no pun intended); the transportation system is second to none providing ready-access to Eastern substantial urban population centers where the available dollars for drug purchase are plentiful and green.

Our information is drugs have evolved into a simple commodity to these boom-cycle predators, Gunner, and they won't hesitate to get in before the next oil-boom to develop clientele. All the economic data we access indicates the Bakken is already gearing up for another crude production acceleration cycle. The primary global crude producers have now voted to tighten the spigots on well-production of crude after the recent all-out attempt to open the valves and glut the crude market, resulting in a forced price reduction on per-barrel crude and refined fuel to winnow-out the less-liquid parties; (sorry, no pun intended); in the oil supply chain. Data suggests North Dakota is contemplating adding 10 crews to its present oil production efforts which means more rigs. You can bet the Mexican cartels and global terrorists have their own economists on their payrolls. More rigs

mean more jobs and more folks with money for drugs to self-medicate and offset the adverse affect of long, dark winter months and outdoor shifts.

Just a heads-up for you Gunner; to try and stay ahead of the bad guys and add some factual predictability to our own preventive strategies, we periodically do a bit of sampling ourselves with the local fracking companies that reduced their presence in the production stats; but remained in the Bakken throughout the down-turn. The data we've accumulated at our level; since you started me on this crazy campaign; reveals an unusual percentage of the oil-patch folks who came for the boom, set down roots in towns like Williston. This phenomenon occurred after the Bakken boom blew-up; (again, no pun intended). Forget West Texas Crude-we're talking the #2 US state producer of crude here: North Dakota. A couple years ago world crude oil overproduction lowered the price of a barrel of triple B crude; (Boomers' Bakken Barrel); well below the cost of production. As oil production went down in the Bakken, a curious thing happened in North Dakota towns like Williston; school enrollment went up. What? Turns out frac companies and wild-catters believed the overproduction would be short-lived and the next up-cycle in prices and production loomed in the foreseeable future. Remember, these oil-patch folks are workers and families used to traveling and chasing the next boom—it's in their DNA. They don't waste time waiting...they just go. Well, after this down-turn a hand-full of these valuable workers didn't just check-out and leave their house keys at the local banks; they stayed in North Dakota. Our data is evident they believed all they had to do was sit it out and one day soon, simply travel down the street to go back to work in the oil-patch.

Do tell Mort. You mean once in a while a theory of mine puts me in the right place at the almost right time?

Unlike Sky's. Growth is simple math to these oil-patch veterans, Gunner, revealing the activity is cycling back up in the Bakken. Land men are still actively chasing mineral and oil rights all over creation. Granted the new definition of oil-boom may not reach its prior zenith of 200 working rigs. But one reason for that will be technology. During the interim down turn, oil-patch techies put their minds and energies to work and modernized drilling rigs which involve fewer crews to tend a

rig and the new rigs can miraculously walk to drill the next hole. Not miles; but enough distance to drill the next hole even if it's 40 feet away.

Cracker Jacks, if the oil economy gets really bad perhaps the rigs can offer rides to tourists.

Focus Gunner.

Sorry Mort. But you always have such intriguing data.

Get this; oil rigs of the future will perform three times the work with the majority of the work concentrating on production as opposed to the present rigs where an inordinate amount of time is dedicated to erecting and tearing down the actual rig. One fracking company we audited had 10 crews working already. This company indicated \$60 per barrel is the magic number for Bakken crude to revitalize production in the Bakken. This per barrel magic number will probably decrease as the rigs continue to modernize. This company we contacted indicated they are hoping to add 15 more frac crews by year end; which is roughly 100 workers per rig, give or take. If the state adds 10 crews as targeted; and a fracking company adds 15, that's roughly a net 2,500 growth in oil patch jobs this year. Unlike at the outset of the Bakken boom, the infrastructure to handle the growth at the community level is now in place. The rail and road upgrades finished recently will allow more commodities and support material to be delivered with less intrusion in the life of inhabitants and fewer improvements needed as the heavy oil haulers will be virtually invisible. And it's not lost on us that your target audience of the usual terrorist suspects will now be easier to track as the pipeline and the working rigs in North Dakota will be their primary targets; which are primarily stationary.

Look Gunner; I know you didn't ascribe to politics in the Marine Corps because the military controlled your destiny at the operational level regardless of the influences from the DOD or the Pentagon; but this Dakota Access pipeline is political and it affects the Bakken as well as oil transport from Canada. One analysis by the AP shows North Dakota could realize \$110 million annually in tax revenue alone for simply supplying the land to be used to hold up the pipeline.

Pretty good work if you can find it especially when the overall oil and production dollars from the Bakken are in a slump. Let's say estimates of security costs for policing the pipeline inside North Dakota is \$30+ million give or take. That's still a nice profit margin for a state like North Dakota. The Indians just don't have the political power or economic leverage to successfully compete with the political clout produced with a carrot including a cache of potentially \$80 million into the state coffers. Remove the present scheme of hauling crude via truck to the nearest Gulf Coast refineries and you can add \$3 per barrel to the price which translates into billions in additional tax revenue each year. The President of the North Dakota Petroleum Council, which I assume is a lobbying group masquerading as a data source, indicated his group deems the Dakota Access pipeline the most important infrastructure project in North Dakota since the interstate highway system. It's not an understatement.

OK, now all I have to do is find Bastillia and her crew among this newly modernized, commodity-driven economy; and nip her intentions to undo all these economics in the bud.

No sweat Gunner. We'll use our technology to turn their technology against them and find them wherever they operate from; no matter what electronic innovation they use. And you and your crew will liquidate their interests...and them.

Outstanding Mort; better than putting up a few billboards advertising terrorists are not welcome in The Bakken. And I'm in agreement Bastillia has a big target painted on the new Dakota Access pipeline. I'm betting she or her Lieutenants infiltrated the protest camp on the lookout for potential crew members among the disenchanteds. They know North Dakota's potential annual tax revenue gain is in excess of \$100 million. To blow huge holes in the pipeline would be a tremendous success for their crew let alone blowing up a number of producing oil rigs especially if they have a plan who to blame it on and I'm surmising it's the Indians. I'm not afraid of the Standing Rock Sioux or Cheyenne River Sioux being successfully recruited by Bastillia because when they hear about Bastillia's anticipated terrorist plot to blow holes in the oil transportation pipeline or destroy crude production rigs; the Tribal members who are very smart will visualize:

ghastly pollution of the Missouri River reservoir which supplies their tribes' drinking water; and tragic environmental results for their tribes' sacred burial sites. My crew's job will be to assist the Indians to understand the Indian nations will be blamed because Bastillia operates as a ghost, taking responsibility for nothing. Simply doing her job and exiting the scene of the crimes. Good news is: I suspect I won't have to recruit anyone to our side; I'll have a ready-made unofficial Indian force to serve as additional security for the already watchful Indian eyes on the pipeline and oil rigs. Also, with the known weapons caches on the rez and a significant number of Indian combat vets I'm confident I'll be able to recruit additional squads of fighters ready to take on Bastillia if and when I need them. I'm having Donny and my Trio subtly uncover the identifies of Indian combat Vets in the Standing Rock Sioux and Cheyenne River Sioux tribes in the event we need to put them to work to stop a threat in a hurry. Thanks for the assist Mort.

Hang on Gunner. How's your Spanish? I'm listening to a conversation stream right now from the Northern California location that one of my data collection techies discovered. I presume the speakers are on mobile devices of some type.

My Spanish is pretty good and most of my crew has the ability to converse in Spanish. But cut in Sarafina if you can. She speaks and understands Spanish like a native and understands various dialects so make sure she gives you a running translation.

Roger that.

Keep it coming to me, too, and anyone Sarafina wants to cut in.

Roger.

Mensajero a base. Instrumentos only opción de posicionamiento. Necesidad de saber si en el curso.

- **Courier to base. Instruments only option for positioning. Need to know if on course.**

La rúbrica 2 hace clic en el sur y sigue derecho.

- **Heading 2 clicks south and straight on.**

Preparación para la transferencia de aguas profundas a inflables.

- **Preparing for deep water transfer to inflatable.**

Inflable listo para la transferencia cuando los ojos en el mensajero.

- **Inflatable ready for transfer when eyes on courier.**

SARAFINA-CAN YOU make sure this thread is forwarded to our foreign team members? I'm fairly certain they all speak English better than we do; except maybe MG who still speaks the slang Strine lingo like the native Aussie she is; but I'm sure everyone will appreciate your Spanish translations.

Funny RB, I think you've set a daily record for humor. I better check to pools to see if I won anything.

Et tu, Brutus?

My, my, your romantic literary side is showing through as well RB. Now I'm sure I won a pool and I have the conversation recorded as evidence. Oh, and I'll make sure I mention the Strine crack to MG next time we speak.

Cracker Jacks, Sarafina. Remind me to stop calling you.

You can't; it is humanly impossible when you love me so much.

Well, I'm sure MG will still love us as she would expect nothing less than fun teasing from her American mates.

Considering how many countries our teammates have performed missions in; I suspect any one of them could survive just fine in Spanish-speaking countries.

Roger that. Their language skills are incredible. In fact, Sarafina, let me know if you ever hear any of our so-called partners speaking in a language you aren't familiar with. I'll suspect it's being used to conceal something in the mission from

the US. I've considered using a few of our Indian friends from Montana and North Dakota to resurrect the Code-Talker concept used in WWII if we want to make aspects of our mission remain uber-confidential.

I think that's a great idea RB. Maybe you can use morse code if that doesn't work. I'm sure nobody knows that language any more just like Fortran. You know we have the ability to encode data and conversations with sophisticated software which works on smart phones.

Thank you for that insight Sarafina. Might I remind you one screw-up and Bastillia pulls up stakes and disappears into the wind.

I'm starting to worry about you RB and your wind-talker, ghost inferences. Bastillia can't imagine what's going to hit her when we muster this international team of bad-ass good guys loaded up with tech even she can't imagine. She's not in Oz; she's not mythical; she's always worked in developing areas of the world where she and her teams maintained the tactical tech edge working in her favor. Let's get rolling, RB, because our ability to employ tech with those who use it in conjunction with our weaponry and trained agents against all enemies foreign and domestic will ultimately blow-her-away and I don't mean on the wind; and the less time Bastillia spends on earth the better.

As usual Sarafina your penchant for succinctly describing our mission and focusing us on the task at hand is laser-like. Find her...kill her. Point taken. I'll interact with the Trio later today and we'll sit down tonight at one of the NSA safe-houses for final briefing before moving into the field. Gunner out.

SOUNDED LIKE THAT went well Sarafina.

I know I was hard on RB, Sned. I just want to make sure he remembers we control the tech in this country; at a level of sophistication most outsiders have no clue about; let alone the operational superiority we enjoy. Nobody is going to crash our little oil party here in North Dakota floating in on the leading edge of a windstorm invisible in a cloud of dust; thinking we're a bunch of hicks driving 4-wheelers;

without us knowing about it. The colorful rumors of Bastillia-the-legend escaping from a prison hanging onto a rope beneath the rotors of a chopper will be just that when we get done with her—fiction—unless she's hanging by her neck. I'll give MG a quick shout and get her on board.

MG? IT'S SARAFINA in the US. Are we secure?

Delighted Sarafina and yes this line is secure.

Excellent. I'm relaying a recording of a live feed from our targeted drug cartel supplier made earlier today between what we believe is the semi-submersible and the mother ship which we surmise is handling the deliverables through the port of Vancouver, B.C. Commodities we suspect are ultimately bound for the Bakken in Dakota and probably oil shale fields in Canada if the majority of the cache is passing through Canada via ground.

How can I help?

We are disjointed at this point because the mission is still in development stages and wide-ranging in scope. I've forwarded copies of the live stream to a few of your known international spooks: Simplistic; Pleasanton; Jameson; who have agreed to participate in Railbak's mission...

And hopefully are on our side.

Ha. Probably remains to be seen. I need any data the Aussies compiled during the infamous Coke brothers import of hard drugs from Jamaica to the US and Canada. Jameson and Pleasanton are searching their data banks for the same data. We know Canada developed substantial data on the how of the Coke bros drug operations and may have brought their British cohorts in to assist. Toronto was a war zone for some time until the last brother was tried in the US. And we noticed similarities between the present approach and the movement of substantial weight years ago. It could be remnants of that organization are involved in the illicit trade again.

I'll make the inquiries and get you whatever I find.

Thanks, MG. Looking forward to attending the next shindig Down Under.

I hope so. We'll definitely have to get Railbak down here now that he's out from under your government's heavy thumb.

MG, he just used that government-relationship as an excuse. RB has pretty much done whatever he wants since he was elevated to his international status by deed and reputation. Oh BTW here's something you can do for me. RB doesn't realize we're going to need a Dr Walt-like MD on this mission. Have you been in touch with him recently or know his whereabouts? Last time I tracked Dr Walt; he was reputed to be Down Under. He's a small-town Norther tier kid who just happens to have the brilliance and biologic problem-solving skills we'll need on this latest Railbak mission. And as we both know DocWalt is always up for a challenge as long as he's not too far from access to a fresh lobster or two.

No worries, Sarafina. With the intel power I have access to here in Oz, anyone can run but they can't hide. I have the ability to locate Dr Walt wherever he is. Luckily the good Dr has left a bold trail of contributions to medical journals just like the proverbial bread crumbs; dissecting everything from Great White sharks; of Great Barrier Reef fame; and their innate ability to reduce infections in internal organs; to prevention of eye infections for underground miners working a mile below the surface around Mt Isa.

He's my guy, MG. Legend has it; once the Doc saved the life of a rather well-heeled and well-known billionaire Northern tier corporate magnate when Doc jumped into the mix and developed a cure. Doc's patient had concocted an exotic malady which the local medical community was slow either to biologically diagnose or cure. And let me tell you; Dr Walt's rarified dimensional medical thinking will be needed if we have team members ultimately strewn from Canada to Africa following this trail of jewels and ivory-supported terrorism.

Gotcha. Sounds like this Railbak op is right up the Doc's alley.

Roger that. Just what the Doctor ordered. Thanks MG.

XI**ERIN GO BRAUGH**

RB? AGAIN WITH THE SAT phone? Did you butt dial me by mistake? You must be bored or trying out a new batt on your SAT phone or heaven help us in the need of some virtual romance. Just a quick heads-up for you RB before you start getting all romantic; as we begin to fire-up our team for this mission; I just spoke with MG in Australia. She has agreed to locate Dr Walt; who is reputed to be Down Under; to let him know we may need him on your mission.

Now that's using your head for more than a hat rack Sarafina...no maybe about it. Unfortunately, I'm neither bored I nor breaking in a new SAT batt. And last on your list...

They weren't mentioned in order of priority RB...

No, Sarafina, I didn't call to get virtually romantic with you.

Disappointing me as usual.

Look, Sarafina, I've got a heads-up for you. I have to duck out of Dodge for a few days and I don't want anyone beyond the inner circle to know. I received an invite to a wedding in Ireland from the Irish daughter of a guy I served with. Her pops and I slugged it out with really bad actors on a number of very dicey ops; who, every time the brass started heating up blackmailed me into promising to always look out for his kiddoes if anything of a terminal nature happened to him. And of course; luck of the Irish nothing bad ever happened to him and he operated like he didn't have a care in the world; except I suspect demons caused by severe PTSD from some of our horrific missions followed by self-medication of the liquid type which we all prescribed for ourselves; but I know both physically on site anywhere in the world and even after he passed; he protected me from on-high more than once and mysteriously guided me to safety.

RB, I smell another one of your stupid stories as a diversionary tactic. How in the hell in the middle of a shadowy-op with the brass hitting the dirt could a member of your team blackmail you?

He was a brilliantly literary, fun guy; no fear; proud of his Irish lineage and Irish writers in particular; James used to tell me he was named after James Joyce and since the US saved his ancestors by giving them a safe place to land; he owed it to us to give us a hand against all these global wierdos trying to undo us. He just happened to be one Cracker Jacks of a sniper too; best I've ever seen; and probably saved us all on more occasions than he'd ever admit to.

Blackmail, RB? I don't need to know James' history with you or my butt and my batt will be done by the time you finish.

Right; anyway, everytime the brass heated-up, my ghostly Irish protector would blackmail me over the comm into making promises; as he claimed his Remington 700 had mysteriously and suddenly jammed. I just couldn't afford to do anything but agree to his terms at that point in the battle. What a pinhead; the team listening on the internal comm I could hear swallowing laughter so I knew he was winning a pool of some kind. The second I agreed to his terms, I would get reports

that opposition fighters started mysteriously getting liquidated football field lengths away from us; clearing the way. So, needless to say I have to make the Irish wedding scene. I just wish you could come with me so I could show my rarely seen romantic interludes. But it would be too suspicious if we both were gone at the same time.

Just an FYI for you RB; I've already seen your romantic interlude and I wouldn't get too big a head about that if I were you; as I'm not that easily impressed...

Cracker Jacks Sarafina; I didn't call you to make you crazy...

Hush, RB. You'd better be preparing to figure out how to bring me several pictures of the wedding party with your big noggin not photo-shopped into a generic wedding photo full of freckle-faced kids by one of your idiot tech team-members; cause I've got better techies than you do; and Fedex better be delivering me a lover-gift found only found inside the pale of Dublin, Ireland, with your handwriting on the address label or I'll have you followed wherever you go after this little dubious Dublin trek. You'll think your Irish sniper blackmail bud James was a piker when I start the blackmail trail.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina; I assure you this is all business; and BTW are you sitting in your cubicle where anyone can hear you?

Why RB? Are you concerned your dark ops reputation would be impuned by those knowing you suffered from a natural lover's desires? Besides I don't have any secrets from Sned. Wait a second RB, are you calling because you wanted to hear my voice because you almost did consider asking me to accompany you to a public event that doesn't require wearing a military uniform as the formal attire but in the final internal Railbakian analysis just couldn't overcome decades of commitment to duty first? I would be placed; me...Sarafina...the love of your life; almost as number 5; in with the top four priorities; GCTM; of your misguided life. I just want you to know I would almost accept your almost invitation with no hesitation to support you standing tall at the wedding alongside God, Country, Team and Mission; and guess what-I almost know what I would have worn to the wedding. I not completely lost on your commitment to duty nor am I insensitive to

it as I assume when you said his demons resulting from PTSD were still tormenting him; he committed suicide. But I can tell you, Railbak the operator in charge had nothing to do with James death. Your job was to get your team in and out of ops as safely as possible while completing the mission objectives. James didn't die on your watch RB. If this is why you called consider yourself set free from any guilt you may or may not feel and I mean feel. We've been down this road a time or two in our ingloriously celebrated relationship and it is important for you to know you are loved by me and even by James' family. It is important for you to go. My concern is you can't seem to overcome your responsibilities to duty for something as simple and natural as attending a wedding when you have obviously reached out for me to talk to after you made the decision. Decision-making is one of your most prized possessions and when I comes to ops I get that; but sometimes you may need to include me in those decisions when issues of the heart are in the mix. Selfishly, I don't want to end up going to your funeral before I go to your wedding. I want the flag I've invested so much of myself in if it comes to that and don't think for a minute spouses and wives of men who pursue your chosen career don't discuss such inevitabilities.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina I don't like our shadowy, intimate, private relationship any more than you do. Maybe after this op maybe we can ease into a more publicly visible relationship.

Why RB, what is going on with you? Did James' passing and how he passed and his freckle-faced kiddoe's wedding invite penetrate your previously Kevlar-protected heart?

Stop Sarafina. I knew I shouldn't have mentioned it to you but I have to depend on you covering for me in the Bakken. Six will know my whereabouts in the UK if I'm needed. Just contact Mort if it's an emergency such as Bastillia was seen shopping at the local strip mall carrying an AK; and Mort will do the rest to find me. I believe Red, uh I mean James; did right by me on so many occasions at his own peril; this is the least I can do for him.

OK, back to business. I can see speaking in terms of feelings instead of the more manly pragmatic topics like life and death and mission history and strategy is but a fleeting moment in the daily Railbak schedule...

Cracker Jacks, Sarafina, I'm not a robot.

You should be so lucky. When things aren't going right for them, they just get their batteries taken out...

What does that mean?

Forget it. Speaking of it; it would seem the Irish are attracted to you.

Can you blame them?

Which is precisely what I'm; again selfishly; worried about since you won't exactly blend on your jaunt to Dublin and its local environs; and I don't mean strictly romantically. What's security like for you on the trip to and fro; and in London and Ireland? I know you can't travel without having one of your obscure handlers making sure you have a body guard or two.

Yeah, my guy Six at Scotland Yard has an intel mate of his in London on demand, who is actually of Irish descent, in case I need a bit of an Irish connection in London. He goes by Charlie in London but he's Irish intelligence so his given name is Cathal which nobody can say correctly outside Ireland. Charlie masquerades in the finance world as an investment broker and trader but he's heavy into intel gathering for Six at SY. So my trip is somewhat timely as Six and I will do a quick debrief in London before I head to Dublin. My security in Dublin and at the wedding; which is outside Dublin near a town called Woodenbridge; is a Navy guy who goes by Buff-O. Six says I'll know who he is immediately when I clear customs. Should be interesting considering one of Buff-O's weight-lifting mates convinced one of the world's best boxers to unretire and set up a humungous revenue match in Vegas. Buff-O is some kind of strength-training-martial-arts fighter who operates primarily around Ireland as security for domestic and visiting royalty. I've known a few of these Irish enforcers during my time in dark ops with Red and they are extremely competent. Most of them educated as well, at Trinity or UCD in

Dublin. If they are scoring that high on their Leaving Cert in a country that values education, these guys and lasses are the types I would have welcomed on my teams.

Well obviously Ireland doesn't like to share its best and brightest with us Yanks, RB. So Dublin does its part to keep the cream of its crop close to home by offering its refreshing social atmosphere in no less than 1,000 well-attended pubs for its Dubliners and welcome visitors up-close-and-personal. While you are sucking down pints of Guinness, hanging out at some delightful Dublin pub, like Toner's or McDaid's or the business and academic-minded Stag's Head; being ogled by the local females...what does your security-minded Buff-O do?

Is ogle a word?

Quiet RB; you think ogle isn't a word? How about furtively? As in; does Buff-O peer furtively at all the pub patrons who attempt to move too close to you or actually take preventive action and frisk strangers with skirts on who approach you? I'm not worried about the guys as I know even at this stage in life you can take them down with no problem; while you argue with all your former black-ops mates about who has the best rugby team...

Side...

Whose side?

Best side in Rugby, not best team.

Whatever; RB, only you and your stupid leatherneck mates would know that little detail. Point is while I'm doing the heavy-lifting in the delightfully culturally advanced Bakken oil fields you are on somebody's side in a pub; with your jaunty Irish cap on your noggin, playing some role, and you've probably never even seen a Rugby game.

Match or Contest.

Stop interrupting me with your sophomoric observations, RB.

When two sides complete in Rugby it's called a match. And my cap is a Kevin and Howlin Donegal Tweed which I will proudly wear in Toner's pub in Dublin, where it just so happens a bunch of us are meeting.

Oh, terrific, RB, a nice public venue for you to be totally exposed in.

I told you my body guard was arranged by Six.

Buff-O sounds like one of those scary weight lifting guys from my gym who enjoys throwing around thousands of pounds of iron for a living and can't wait to throw a few people around. I'm not talking about enforcers anyway, I'm talking about all the beautiful, high tone Irish women flaunting around in downtown Dublin.

What? Flaunting? Irish women don't flaunt.

Don't you what me RB. You know coming back from your stressful missions I understood better than anyone what you needed and never drew the line on data or gifts you could or couldn't give me except anything that couldn't be spoken or gift wrapped in a box. How many tall, handsome, carved up, mysterious, bronze-skinned articulate guys like you are floating around Dublin; completely untethered; suddenly flush with Euros; in downtown-Dublin these days. It's a rhetorical question in case you don't know RB: none. You'll be a magnet for all those female fair-skinned, extremely stylish, economically independent; youngish freckle-sprayed professional brainiac finance and tech grads from Trinity and UCD, who also compete with Italian/Manhattan runway models for global fashionista recognition in 8" heels. I'd be a much better bodyguard for you RB against those threats, than Mr. hire-a-bad-ass Buff-O. Do you have any idea how many of these Irish women are being recruited by the local financial institutions as the finance and tech industries prepare for a big move from London to Dublin after Brexit.

So you're saying there might even be Brit women in Dublin wearing spike heels and high fashion garb too; combined with that saucy accent?

Jesus RB. You are incorrigible. And I'm sure you won't just be in Dublin. Your so-called body guard Buff-O will have you all over his island paradise including showing off physiques at the 40-FOOT in front of all the formerly stylish clad Irish

beauties suddenly revealing their too cute freckles aren't just on their faces as the take the plunge; so-to-speak.

Cracker Jacks Sarafina; what do you know about the 40 Foot. It was male only and fairly secret to the outside world for most of its known existence. Besides I don't think many females want to jump into the Atlantic during the annual Christmas Plunge. Maybe the ladies will be bikini-clad in the semi-heat of August but I won't be there.

Well, you can bet you won't be there alone in August, if I'm still on the scene. Believe me; they'll be there for the Christmas Plunge in droves with their eyes clad in Wayfarers to get a discreet peek at the boys. And what do you mean; what do I know about the 40 FOOT? I'm an intellectual in several languages and genres of art and literature who was probably reading Ulysses; a James Joyce classic; in which he immortalized the 40 FOOT; long before you were trying to figure out what the X's and O's meant on the blackboard during your football playing practices when you were in high school.

Scrimmages.

Stop interrupting when I'm attacking you.

Football scrimmages.

Hush...In fact RB you might do well to read a few of the great Irish writers like Joyce; starting with the Dubliners so you won't have to focus for longer than a short story the length of a chapter. Then you'll have more to talk about with your new lady friends because I can tell you they are intellectual and dimensional, comfortable discussing any topic from literature to politics and undertaking any competitive task; including drinking pints of the Black until your beautiful face is framed in a meat pie.

Cracker Jacks, take a breath Sarafina. The last time you used the word incorrigible I had to look it up. You are losing it Sarafina, it's just a simple trip to Ireland for a wedding and I won't even be armed...Sarafina? Hello...Sarafina? Cracker Jacks. Guess that conversation is over; it went well I thought.

GUNNER, IT'S DONNY.

Good to hear from you Donny. I just got off the phone with Sarafina.

How did that go?

Never as well as when I am visualizing the conversation before the call.

I prefer to not spend a lot of time on the phone with Sarafina, Gunner. No offense but she scares me. Sarafina is either wicked smart or constantly mixing up her languages by accident so I have no idea she's talking about most of the time.

She's all of that Donny. Don't take it personally; Sarafina never does anything by accident. What's the scoop? Any scuttle-butt on the FUBAR mission in Niger I need to know about?

Don't know if you need to know but I can tell you the mission intel was on a Pentagon-initiated list of Need-To-Know personnel which excluded some pretty high-ranking politicians who got cut out of the ops briefings.

Cracker Jacks.

Exactly...and it gets worse. According to one of my primary sources; a multi-lingual operator who spent time working with the SEAL Team Eight Intel group; the Special Ops Detachment in Europe; and is familiar with the Sub Saharan Africa battalion; our guys were part of an A-Team participating in a Foreign Internal Defense mission, training Niger forces; when they were ambushed returning to their base from a sit-down with local village elders. I'm told this ambush was carried out by a superior force armed to the teeth. He maintains it is typical of these interdiction groups who are historically and hysterically unable to control the intel; which probably travels faster by mouth in some circles than it does via electronics. Guaranteed somebody screwed-up or got lazy with internal mission intel on the return trip to not be aware of a threat that size, heavily armed, able to move close enough to engage the Niger force with small arms fire before being detected.

Well, it's no consolation to the operations' trainers; I know; but I've participated in those intel FUBAR missions up-close-and-personal; especially in Africa. And the answer in many cases is we have to depend on our own intel data including eyes-in-the-sky to ensure safety of the missions.

Honestly Gunner, I think it's inexcusable. A lone sniper and a spotter is one thing but a large, mobile force; whether with or without transport; should be discoverable long before they are within range; with the scale of active snooping gear we employ on our active missions. The ball was dropped or the fumble was hidden and ignored; I suspect for compensation.

De rigueur; corruption is woven deep into the cultural fabric in some areas of developing countries' governments; requiring a plethora of intel options on our mission menus to chose from; with no budget constraints; and trust shouldn't be on the menu anywhere. The militaries and defense-related agencies in these countries in general cannot be allowed to take intel control over missions our troops are involved in; even if at the training level. We cannot expose our mission personnel to exploitation by the misguided efforts of terrorists and other malcontents secretly embedded within these countries' agencies as they attempt to upend our ability to assist these countries in disenfranchising these bad-hands from the grip they presently enjoy.

I read you loud and clear Gunner. But are you convinced VV is the one with; shall I be so bold: the correct moral compass to work on prying bad-hands from their present grips on the throats of burgeoning countries' cultural transitions?

I hear you Donny. I'm convinced VV has the determination and fortitude to do whatever we require. I believe if we pay him enough and I oversee his assignment on our op; it's our job to make sure he follows the moral compass's arrow we provide him with; so it's our burden to ensure VV represents us honorably.

God help us.

And our team...we're set. Let's roll. Gunner Out.